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A Guerilla War At Sea: The Sri Lankan Civil War

by Paul A. Povlock



Top: LTTE Sea Tiger Small Fast Attack Craft underway.

Bottom: The Sri Lankan Navy's elite Rapid Action Boat Squadron (RABS) conduct a photo exercise with the Offshore Patrol Vessel *Sayura* in the background.

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Counterinsurgency case studies typically focus on the terrestrial aspects of the conflict for the unsurprising reason that the target population of the conflict lives on land. Insurgent maritime forces are typically small to insignificant and have a correspondingly marginal effect on rebel courses of action. The counterinsurgent side's naval forces usually overmatch the insurgent's and thus key elements of the maritime aspects of counterinsurgencies become relegated to the appendices of the relevant analysis.

The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009) is thus somewhat of an anomaly. Both the Sri Lankan government and the insurgents fielded capable naval forces that directly affected the flow of operations during the war. The rebel Tamil Tigers required secure sea lines of communication to supply their forces with the apparatus of modern warfare and used the open maneuver space of the sea to attack the Sri Lankan armed forces, government and economy. Over time, the Sea Tigers, the insurgent maritime force, developed into a highly capable and aggressive organization that was able to operate in all maritime domains across the spectrum of conflict. The Sri Lankan naval forces were initially hampered by their government's lack of resolve and interest. At the start of the war the Sri Lankan Navy (SLN) was seen more as a support organization for the Army and was tasked accordingly. Over time the duties and responsibilities of the SLN expanded and eventually it was able to wrest control of the vital approaches to the island nation away from the insurgent forces. While the effects of the maritime component of the conflict are still under review, the conflict demonstrates the range of maritime operations that insurgents are capable of conducting, and the power that maritime counterinsurgent forces can apply to help win a complex irregular war.

Background to the Conflict



The Northern Indian Ocean.¹

¹. "Flying LTTE Tigers, LET Terrorist Boats Help Spur Indian Aerostat Buys from Israel," Defense Industry Daily. <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/flying-ltte-tigers-help-spur-indias-aerostat-radar-buy-from-israel-03309/> (accessed 14 December 2010).

The origins of the peoples who currently occupy the island nation of Sri Lanka are contentious. More than thirty four thousand years ago, humans crossed the narrow strait that separates India from Ceylon.² The Hindu religion spread from India and became the predominant religion of the people that lived in the north and eastern portions of the island. By the third century B.C., Buddhism, which also originated in India, became the prevailing spiritual force of the Sinhalese population that inhabited the central and southern portions of the island. Tamil influence, again originating from India, first became significant around 237 B.C. with the usurpation of the Sinhalese royalty by Tamil invaders. It took twenty two years to eject these Tamil warriors and reestablish Sinhalese control of the island. Tamil migration paralleled this initial incursion and continued over the centuries. By the seventh century A.D., Tamil enclaves in the north of the island were well established though usually under the political control of the Sinhalese kings that lived in the south and central areas. Other expeditionary cultures brought their own religions. Islam was introduced during the eastern expansion of Arab traders and Muslim evangelists during the Middle Ages while the Portuguese brought Roman Catholicism to the island in the 1500s. The Dutch brought their brand of Protestantism when they dislodged the Portuguese a hundred years later, while the muscular Christianity of the Anglican Church arrived with the British Empire in the second decade of the nineteenth century.³ Sinhalese political control of the entire island waxed and waned over the centuries prior to the European domination of the Indian Ocean. When the island's rulers were powerful, island wide governance was reinforced and the kingdom's armies were able to intervene in nearby India and raid lands as far away as Burma. Succession disputes, rebellions and foreign incursions fractured the authority of the Sinhalese monarchy. By the advent of Portuguese penetration into the region, the island held three competing political entities, two Sinhalese kingdoms centered on the cities of Kotte and Kandy and a Tamil realm focused at Jaffna. The Europeans were able to exploit these internal divisions as first the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and finally the British displaced one another as the leading power on the island.

The establishment of British authority led to the application of the tenets of imperial rule to all of the diverse ethnic and religious entities on the island. British enclaves in Ceylon were initially ruled by imperial authorities in India. Ceylon achieved independent Crown Colony status in 1805.⁴ By 1815 the British conquest was complete and the island was unified under London's control.⁵ Violent resistance to British rule was crushed and the island was subdivided into five administrative provinces (North, South East, West and Central) that bisected previously established ethnic areas.⁶ As part of the larger British Empire, economic activity on the island was converted to a currency based scheme which served to further the financial interests of London as opposed to the native population. Land was taken from subsistence Sinhalese farmers to support export crop agriculture. During the coffee and tea growing economic bubbles in the mid nineteenth century approximately one million Tamils were brought from India to the island as indentured laborers.⁷ This influx placed additional pressure on the Sinhalese majority on the

² Chandra Richard De Silva, *Sri Lanka: A History* (New York: Advent Books, 1988), 17-18.

³ De Silva, 176.

⁴ James D. Scudieri, "The Indian Peace-Keeping Force in Sri Lanka, 1987-90: A Case Study in Operations Other Than War" (research paper, Fort Leavenworth, KS: United States Army Command and General Staff College, School of Advance Military Studies, 1994), 2.

⁵ De Silva, 148.

⁶ Asoka Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka* (London: Routledge, 2009), 29.

⁷ C. Christine Fair, *Urban Battlefields of South Asia*, RAND Report DAS W01-01-C-003 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2004), 17.

island as the Indian Tamils settled in the Central Districts, further displacing the Sinhalese. The indigenous Tamils were primarily located in the Northern and Eastern Districts.

Using a standard operating procedure of divide and conquer, the British pitted the various ethnic groups against one another in order to achieve their own goals. Separate legal codes for the various ethnic and religious groups were authorized.⁸ The British required knowledge of the English language for all natives that desired to participate in the organs of the colonial administration. This requirement tended to benefit the Tamil population. The Tamil population was able to enroll in missionary schools that were predominantly located in the northern areas of the island and learn their new overlord's language. The Buddhist Sinhalese had fewer opportunities to attend such schools and were generally affronted by the values of Christian missionary and British schooling. Over the generations the Tamils occupied the majority of positions in the colonial infrastructure and exerted greater power and influence within the governmental apparatus than the relative size of their population might have suggested.⁹

By the beginning of the twentieth century, despite generally good relations between the colonial rulers and the Tamil and Sinhalese elite, tensions began to simmer between the ethnic groups. British efforts to defuse this unrest by creating a more democratic government on the island did not go as planned. Britain adopted an electoral model of proportional representation based on ethnicity as opposed to direct election. Indigenous Tamils and the Tamil laborers each received separate representation in the council, while the smaller minority Muslim population received none. Christian educated Sinhalese were favored over the Buddhist Sinhalese, both of which were less politically astute than the better educated Tamils. The Tamils were seen as part of the British colonial apparatus by less influential ethnic groups, particularly the majority Buddhist Sinhalese.¹⁰ The ethnic tensions that had previously been mitigated by geographic separation over time increased due to the stresses exacerbated by the currency based economy, by the perceived minority favoritism by an external imperial power, and ethnic migration of the Tamil laborers into traditional Sinhalese lands. In 1915 riots broke out between the Sinhalese and Tamils as the friction between them could no longer be restrained by British authority. The riots were suppressed, often violently, but they served as a catalyst for incipient Sinhalese nationalism.¹¹

In the 1920s and 1930s the British attempted to move the island's political processes towards a more proportional democracy. The Sinhalese sought to take advantage of these reforms while the minority Tamils were apprehensive of any change in the governance of the island. Greater political autonomy sounded appealing to the Tamils, but not when precious privileges were at stake.¹² In 1931 the Donoughmore Commission, set up to introduce constitutional reform in the colony, promulgated universal suffrage at a time when the population's political attitudes were aligning along ethnic domains. The elites from both the Tamil and Sinhalese communities opposed the reforms proposed by the commission. The Tamils did not want to lose their privileged status in the colony while the Sinhalese did not want to enfranchise the descendants of the Indian Tamils that had been brought to the island. British efforts to soothe the stresses of the growing political forces actually lead to greater strains in

⁸. Bandarage, 31.

⁹. Fair, 17.

¹⁰. Bandarage, 32-33.

¹¹. Robert Connor, "Defeating the Modern Asymmetric Threat" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2002), 16.

¹². William Clarence, "Conflict and Community in Sri Lanka," *History Today*, 52, no. 7 (July 2002): 41.

society. The establishment of a more representative parliamentary democracy was another step in the Sinhalese Buddhist majority's reclamation of power from the British and the erosion of the minority Tamil influence within the government and society.¹³

The trajectory of increased Sinhalese political power proportionate to the population continued through the Second World War. Tamil suggestions of a "balanced representation" based on ethnic makeup were rejected as undemocratic, as this proposal studiously ignored the plight of the other minorities on the island in favor of a proposed Tamil equivalence with Sinhalese representation. British concerns about the political maturity of the island society were apparent but they continued to support the concept of majority rule, regardless of the favored relations they enjoyed with the Tamil elite. With the general decline of British imperial power following the Second World War, independence for Ceylon became a foregone conclusion, with the Sinhalese majority calling the tune for the geographically united yet culturally diverse state.¹⁴

Independence in 1948 did not lessen the ethnic tensions in Ceylon. On the contrary, it probably made them worse as the majority Sinhalese were now able to exercise their political prerogatives. The national flag was changed to emphasize Sinhalese preeminence.¹⁵ Political parties competed for Sinhalese votes and showed little interest protecting minority concerns. Winning the majority Sinhalese vote was the key to winning the national elections, and the parties became more focused on placating this segment of the electorate than building multiethnic consensus. Popular pressure to make Sinhalese the state language and Buddhism the state religion became rallying cries for political parties and politically active monks. Ethnic pride and the fear of absorption by the newly independent nation of India led to other legal actions promoting Sinhalese preeminence. In the capital city of Colombo the new government renounced the citizenship of any individual who had not resided on the island for more than seven years. This legislation had the effect of negating the citizenship rights of a million Tamils of Indian descent. Tamil objections to these changes were swept aside by the government.¹⁶

In the decades following independence, Tamil resistance to the political and cultural preeminence of the Sinhalese majority and their promotion of a Sinhalese national identity became the focal point of conflict in domestic politics. The majority parties in parliament rose and fell based on their ability to harness the increasingly intransigent forces advocating Sinhalese domination of the government and society. It was not until 1957 that citizenship was restored for all the Indian Tamils. Further attempts at compromise to address minority concerns were scuttled on the twin shoals of the parties' advocacy of Sinhalese primacy and hostility to minority rights. Large scale riots erupted again in 1956 between the Tamils and Sinhalese, an increasingly frequent event as extremists from both ethnic groups reacted to the government's initiatives to control ethnic tensions even as it promoted Sinhalese preeminence. The Prime Minister, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, was assassinated in 1959 by a Buddhist monk. Bandaranaike had attempted to achieve national reconciliation with the Tamils regarding

¹³. Bandarage, 35-36.

¹⁴. Ibid., 36-38.

¹⁵. Patrick B. Baetjer, "An Alternative View: Sri Lanka's Experience with an Enduring Insurgency," in *The Interagency and Counterinsurgency Warfare: Stability, Security, Transition and Reconstruction Roles*, ed. Joseph R. Cerami and Jay W. Boggs (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army War College, 2007), 224.

¹⁶. Clarence, 44-45.

language and government's support to the Sinhalese expansion into less densely populated but traditional Tamil lands.¹⁷

Sinhalese pressure to reduce other minority privileges generated further concern. Complicated methods to apportion college admissions and government jobs based on religion, district boundaries, and ethnicity all tended to reduce the economic and political power that the minority Tamils exercised. By adopting Sinhalese as the working language for college and government exams, the Tamils were immediately disadvantaged. This action came at a time when population growth was greater than economic development. Denying Tamils economic opportunity threatened their very existence. Yet even with the expansion of available government jobs, the Sinhalese college graduates often attained an education without the accompanying possibility for employment as the slowly growing economy had no place for them. The Sinhalese students tended to pursue their degrees in the social sciences while Tamil students tended to concentrate on the sciences, engineering and medicine.¹⁸

The government in Colombo also implemented financial policies and international initiatives that furthered the socialist ideals of the mainstream political parties but tended to limit economic growth on the island, such as the nationalization of the nation's oil companies in the 1960s.¹⁹ Obsessed with the fear of an Indian invasion impelled by the Indian domestic political pressure from the forty million Tamils living just across the Palk Strait on the mainland, the Ceylon government attempted to stay out of New Delhi's political orbit.²⁰ Friction with India arose during her wars with Pakistan and the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), where claims of neutrality by Ceylon were viewed suspiciously by the Indian government. An abortive insurgency in the southern portion of the island in the early 1970s also focused the attention of the Colombo government away from the growing Tamil unrest in the north. With North Korean and Chinese assistance, the People's Liberation Front (Janatha Vimikthi Peremuna or JVP) attempted to overthrow the government in 1971, only to be crushed by Ceylon's Army. By the mid 1970s the JVP remnants were in jail or in hiding in jungles.²¹

In the traditional Tamil areas in the northern regions of the island, local political and civic leaders viewed the overall trends in Ceylon society with great unease. The growing power of the Sinhalese majority and the fear it generated in Jaffna, the cultural center of the Tamil population, led to the formation of numerous political organizations. Most of these groups attempted to work peacefully within the democratic process. In 1972, the Tamil United Front (TUF) was established in the port city of Trincomalee to incorporate the smaller Tamil political parties. The TUF's goals were the safeguarding of Tamil rights, which included promoting equality for the Tamil language, equality of citizenship for all Tamils on the island, secular guarantees preventing religious favoritism, the abolition of religious caste and the call for a decentralized democratic government. The TUF was unsuccessful in accomplishing any of these objectives. The further erosion of Tamil rights became codified in the 1972 constitution which firmly established Buddhism and the Sinhalese language as the bedrock of the government and society.²² The constitution also officially changed the country's name to the Democratic

¹⁷. Ibid., 44-45.

¹⁸. Bandarage, 58-60.

¹⁹. Connor, 19.

²⁰. Palitha Ruwan Wangasooriya, "The Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: A Clash of Civilizations" (master's thesis, United States Army Command and General Staff College, 1997), 6-7.

²¹. Connor, 20-21.

²². Clarence, 45-46.

Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, discarding the ancient title of Ceylon, in accordance with the desires of the Sinhalese majority. A new political party, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), emerged from the wreckage of the TUF platform, winning local elections throughout the northern and eastern sections of the island. The TULF also proclaimed its willingness to work within the Sri Lankan parliamentary process, but a greater militancy began to take hold within the party. Increased autonomy for Tamils was the TULF's election slogan, but thoughts and desires for outright Tamil independence energized the movement. Other militant groups began to emerge in the 1970s that took advantage of the surplus of educated yet unemployed young Tamils who lacked confidence of any bright future within the increasingly Sinhalese dominated society. The TULF leadership attempted to act as the buffer between the Sri Lankan government and these disaffected youth, but the numerous youth groups became increasingly radicalized over the next decade. This radicalization was accelerated by Sinhalese majority's continuing disinterest in any political compromise.²³

The most prominent of these youth groups was the Tamil New Tigers (TNT), which later rebranded itself as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (homeland), or LTTE. The LTTE was formed in 1976 by Velupillai Prabhakaran from the military wing of the TNT as well as various criminal elements. The son of a Hindu official in the colonial and then Sri Lankan government, Prabhakaran proved himself to be an exceptionally dynamic and effective leader.²⁴ His political and military instincts were usually outstanding and his ruthless devotion to the cause of Tamil independence was without equal.²⁵ Prabhakaran maintained a small command element of well trained, highly disciplined and fanatical devotees, as evidenced by their wearing cyanide capsules to be used in case of impending capture.²⁶ During the late 1970s and early 1980s the LTTE came to dominate the other militant Tamil groups. Enforcing a brutal discipline for his allies and targeted assassination of his adversaries, Prabhakaran out maneuvered his Tamil rivals and became a powerful element in Sri Lankan politics. The primary objective of the LTTE was the creation of an independent homeland (Tamil Eelam) in the northern and eastern Sri Lankan districts.²⁷ The LTTE began a low level subversion operation to neutralize the Sri Lankan government forces in the predominantly Tamil areas in the northern part of the island. Robbing banks to fund the movement, murdering government informers, and attacking police stations and army posts allowed the LTTE to increase their tactical proficiency and gain credibility with the restive Tamil population. These minor actions attracted disaffected Tamil youth to a movement that provided action and not merely words.²⁸ Mass arrests of the Tamil youths by Sri Lankan authorities did little to quell this unrest.²⁹ The more moderate Tamil politicians used the violent acts of the LTTE as leverage against the Sri Lankan government, but the moderates' control of the LTTE was marginal at first and then later undetectable. The TULF could not represent the increasingly radicalized Tamil youth and were incapable of achieving any resolution of the issues most pressing to the ethnic minority.³⁰ Ethnic tensions came to a boil again in 1977

²³. Fair, 18.

²⁴. "Slain LTTE chief Prabhakaran's father dead." Deccan Herald, 7 January 2010.

<http://www.deccanherald.com/content/45460/slain-ltte-chief-prabhakarans-father.html> (accessed 20 June 2011).

²⁵. Will Hartley, *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism*, Issue Thirty (Alexandria, VA: Jane's Information Group, Inc., 2009), 428-429.

²⁶. Rohan Kumar Gunaratna, "Changing Nature of Warfare: LTTE at the Razor's Edge" (master's thesis, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1997), 88.

²⁷. Hartley, 421.

²⁸. Clarence, 46.

²⁹. Bandarage, 69.

³⁰. Ibid., 72-76.

following the national elections. Rioters and looters targeted Tamil businesses and residences, while Sinhalese residents were ethnically cleansed from the Jaffna peninsula by Tamil roughs, causing additional social divergence between the Sinhalese vision for Sri Lanka and the nascent Tamil nationalism. The Sri Lankan police were ineffective at protecting citizens of any denomination.³¹



LTTE Leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.³²

The hardening of distinct and conflicting national identities between the Sinhalese and Tamils continued into the 1980s. Efforts by the Tamil politicians and the Sri Lankan government to mitigate the differences were not effective as the extreme segments of the political spectrum prevented compromise. Championing the cause of Tamil minority rights, the TULF maintained the public façade as a lawful opposition to the government in Colombo, even as it funneled money to the LTTE. The LTTE continued to make inroads with the Tamil population while receiving training and arms from Middle Eastern terrorist groups as well as nearby India. Prabhakaran became highly proficient at conducting low level attacks on the Sri Lankan government while simultaneously establishing ties with Tamil groups in Tamil Nadu, a state in India directly across the Palk Strait on the Indian mainland. LTTE attacks against policemen and moderate politicians in the Tamil regions increased while the reactive military and police response proved ineffective in suppressing the budding insurgency. In 1978 the LTTE conducted a dramatic raid on an airport near Colombo, destroying an Air Ceylon airplane on the tarmac. The police arrested scores of Tamil youths and held the suspected terrorists

³¹. Ibid.

³². Popham, Peter. "How China Won Sri Lanka's Civil War." *The Independent*, 23 May 2010.
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/how-beijing-won-sri-lankas-civil-war-1980492.html> (accessed 29 June 2010).

without trial under the highly controversial Prevention of Terrorism Act. Poorly disciplined and unskilled government policemen caused little harm to the LTTE cadre members and the police's unconstrained behavior further incited the restless Tamil population to violence.³³

In December 1982, citing these numerous domestic disturbances, the Sri Lankan government proposed a national referendum to extend the term of the sitting members of the Parliament for a further six years. Despite the resistance of all of the opposition political parties, the vote was held and the term extension for the parliament was authorized. The government claimed victory after the referendum despite irregularities in the voting process. All the Tamil regions voted against the referendum and the Tamil members of Parliament resigned their seats in July 1983, when their nominal terms would have expired. The election was perceived as fraudulent by both the international community and the locals, further eroding the Sri Lankan government's claims of legitimacy. Subsequent attacks on Tamil university students by their Sinhalese classmates in the spring of 1983 made some observers feel that the government was orchestrating some sort of climatic showdown to display their new power.³⁴

On 23 July 1983, LTTE insurgents ambushed a Sri Lankan Army patrol in Jaffna, killing 13 soldiers. Retribution was swift and severe. Army soldiers in the north killed 14 Tamils, but the most significant violence was concentrated in Colombo. Here, pro-government provocateurs led mobs that rampaged through Tamil neighborhoods on a mission of murder and arson.³⁵ Tamil businesses were burned and perhaps as many as 400 people were killed in the rampage that lasted for two days. The rioting spread throughout the nation, leading to 2,000 to 3,000 deaths. Perhaps 175,000 Tamils became displaced as they fled the violence.³⁶ With this spark, the Sri Lankan Civil War can be said to have begun in earnest. Like many internal conflicts, the centrifugal forces took decades to build up to large scale violence, but when the final rift occurred, the ability of Sri Lankan society to tamp down the violent urges of the competing groups had been significantly reduced.

³³. Bandarage, 100-102.

³⁴. Ibid., 101-104.

³⁵. Ibid., 104-105.

³⁶. Clarence, 46.



Sri Lanka Political Divisions and Major Transportation Routes.³⁷

³⁷. Sri Lanka. Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas Libraries.
http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/sri_lanka_pol01.jpg (accessed 14 December 2010).

SRI LANKA: PEOPLES AND PLACES

Sri Lanka is an island nation . . .

- Sri Lankan Navy Chief Vice Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda

The island nation of Sri Lanka lies just off the southeastern tip of the Indian subcontinent. The island is approximately 280 miles long with the largest width of 140 miles in the south. The nation of Sri Lanka is about the same size as the state of West Virginia.³⁸ The terrain is mainly level plains some 100-650 feet above sea level. In the southwest portion of the island, the plains merge with the central highlands and rise slowly into the mountains. In the southeast, the plains abruptly shift to more mountainous terrain. The north and eastern areas of the island are flatter, with long slender ridges that rise up from the central highlands. Sri Lanka has a number of short rivers that begin in the central highlands and extend down the steep terrain into the sea. The further inland portions of the rivers are fast flowing and often unnavigable, while the lower reaches are slower running and likely to flood during the monsoon seasons.³⁹

Located barely 360 nautical miles north of the equator, Sri Lanka has a hot tropical climate. Temperatures average approximately 80 F with cooler temperatures in the mountainous regions. January is the coolest month while May is the hottest. Sri Lanka experiences two monsoon seasons. The first, from mid-May to October, brings heavy rain and moisture to the southwestern portion of the island. The second, from December to March, deposits more rain in the north and eastern regions. These regions receive little additional moisture during the rest of the year. The southern regions receive an average of 100 inches of rain per year; the north and east from 150 to 75 inches. The humidity runs parallel with the rainy seasons and terrain, but averages 70 to 90 percent.⁴⁰

The flora of the island have adapted to this annual rain cycle. In the drier areas of the north, the standard vegetation is scrub forest. Rough bushes and even cacti fill in the gaps in these drier areas. When the rainfall is plentiful the plants grow rapidly and the countryside is verdant. Plant growth is minimal during the non-monsoon periods. Trees grow a thick bark to lock in moisture and the uppermost branches weave together to provide protection below from the sun and dry winds. The wetter regions of the south have more tropical forests, with tall evergreen trees and dense underbrush. Over the years, the increasing population on the island has denuded much of the native vegetation.⁴¹

Sri Lanka has 833 miles of coastline.⁴² A coastal belt of low elevation surrounds most of the island, leading inland to rolling plains and mountains. The coastal beaches are sandy and shallow lagoons that intrude into the coastline are common. Rocky cliffs, bays and offshore islands are prevalent in the northeastern and southwest regions. Trincomalee, the major port on

³⁸. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Sri Lanka," <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ce.html> (accessed July 9, 2010).

³⁹. The Library of Congress, "A Country Study: Sri Lanka," under "Country Studies," ed. Russell R. Ross and Andrea Matles Savada, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html> (accessed July 9, 2010).

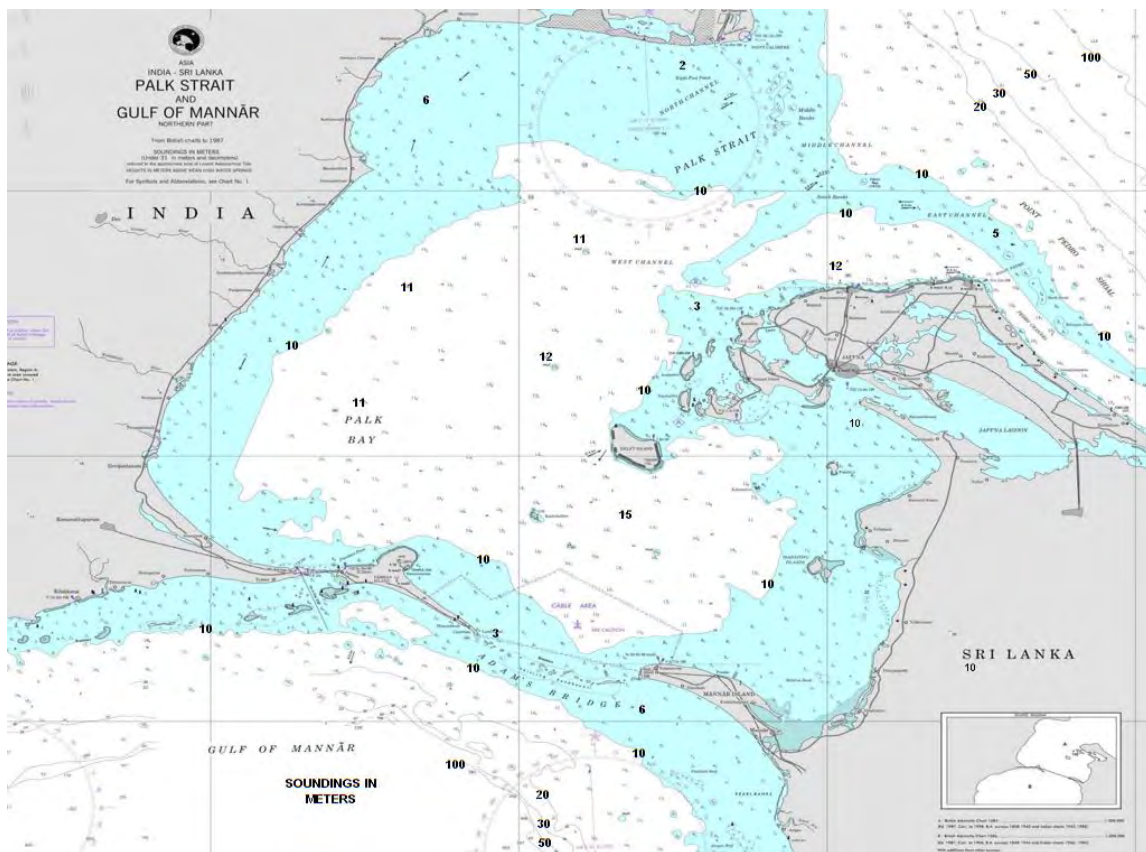
⁴⁰. Ibid.

⁴¹. Ibid.

⁴². U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Sri Lanka," <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ce.html> (accessed July 9, 2010).

the eastern coast, has an exceptional natural harbor. Numerous fishing villages occupy the coastal areas.⁴³

The waters around the island vary considerably in depth. The area around the coast line is shallow, most notably in the northeastern region. Waters around the Jaffna peninsula and the Palk Strait are particularly shallow and tidal sand drifts often lower the water depth to less than only a few feet, which affects the ability of larger ships to operate there.⁴⁴ Large numbers of fishing vessels ply the coastal waters, making it difficult to detect and track hostile contacts amongst the numerous native small craft. The Palk Strait, which separates Sri Lanka from India, is less than 40 kilometers in width. Reefs and shallow waters make the strait treacherous to navigate and hence unsuitable for most deep draft vessels.⁴⁵



The Palk Strait and Gulf of Mannar.⁴⁶

⁴³. The Library of Congress, "A Country Study: Sri Lanka," under "Country Studies," ed. Russell R. Ross and Andrea Matles Savada, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html> (accessed July 9, 2010).

⁴⁴. Tim Fish, "Sri Lanka Learns to Counter Sea Tigers' Swarm Tactics," *Jane's Navy International*, March 2009, 21.

⁴⁵. The Library of Congress, "A Country Study: Sri Lanka," under "Country Studies," ed. Russell R. Ross and Andrea Matles Savada, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html> (accessed 8 December 2010).

⁴⁶. National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, Palk Strait and Gulf of Mannar, *Nautical Chart: Region 6 - Eastern Africa, Southern Asia #63250*, 1987.

The population of Sri Lanka was slightly over 14.8 million people in 1981. About three quarters of the population was Sinhalese, most of whom were Buddhist. The Sinhalese regions of in southwest portions of the island had the highest population density while the Tamil regions in the north were more sparsely populated. Sri Lankan Tamils comprised 1.9 million of the population, while Indian Tamils made up 818,000. The Sri Lankan Tamils mainly lived in the Northern and Eastern Provinces of the island, while the Indian Tamils could be found in the Central Provinces, often in the predominantly Sinhalese areas. While most Tamils were Hindus, significant numbers of Tamils were also Roman Catholic or Muslim (the LTTE leader, Prabhakaran, was a Roman Catholic). The Sri Lankan Tamils tended to look down on the lower caste Indian Tamils, who were not as keen for autonomy as their Sri Lankan brethren. There were also just over 1 million Sri Lankan Moors, most of who practiced the Islamic faith, spoke the Tamil language and lived in the Eastern Province.⁴⁷ While there was a strong correlation between ethnic and religious identity on the island, not all Tamils were Hindus nor were all Sinhalese Buddhists. Language was another commonality in the communities, where ethnic groups typically spoke their respective languages, though English was a common language on the island.⁴⁸

Flood Tide for The Sea Tigers: 1984-2002

Geographically, the security of Tamil Eelam is interlinked with that of its seas. It is only when we are strong on the seas and break the dominance the enemy now has that we will be able to retain the land areas we liberated and drive our enemies from our homeland.

- Velupillai Prabhakaran, LTTE Leader

Following the 1983 killing of Sri Lankan soldiers and eruption of ethnic violence across the island, the LTTE began a campaign of increased subversion and violence against both the government and any internal dissenters within the Tamil community. In the early years of the conflict the LTTE was incapable of much more than this low level violence and subversion. The 1970s and early 1980s were spent increasing the LTTE's military capability and Prabhakaran's grip on the leadership of the Tamil insurgency. In 1983, the Research and Analysis Wing (R & AW) of the Indian intelligence agency set up numerous training camps in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu to train and equip Tamil insurgents for operations against the Sri Lankan government. The Indian government provided limited and covert assistance to the Tamil insurgents in support of domestic politics. The Indian electorate in Tamil Nadu supported the political aspirations of their ethnic brethren across the Palk Strait in Sri Lanka. Such assistance also served as a form of payback for the previous Sri Lankan support of Indian adversaries. Over time the LTTE became a favored insurgent group of the R & AW.⁴⁹ It was relatively easy for the LTTE rebels to travel back to Sri Lanka from the R & AW training camps. Small craft carrying personnel and weapons could easily infiltrate from the Indian coastline across the Palk Strait to the beaches and lagoons of northern Sri Lanka. The city of Jaffna was also within easy reach as

⁴⁷. The Library of Congress, "A Country Study: Sri Lanka," under "Country Studies," ed. Russell R. Ross and Andrea Matles Savada, <http://countrystudies.us/sri-lanka/38.htm> (accessed 24 June 2011).

⁴⁸. Wangasooriya, 1-12.

⁴⁹. Connor, 30.

a logistics hub for the LTTE as the Sri Lankan government had marginal control of the port facilities and even less of the local seaborne trade. As the Tamil insurgency grew, Sri Lankan troops vacated the main streets of Jaffna during the night, leaving the population and facilities exposed to LTTE subversion.⁵⁰

The LTTE focused its efforts on achieving control of the Tamil population. The insurgents killed local police officers, mined roads, destroyed civilian aircraft, ethnically cleansed areas under their control, ambushed patrolling Sri Lankan soldiers and raided prisons to liberate captured insurgents. Perhaps more effective than these attacks were the ones Prabhakaran conducted against his political rivals. Moderate Tamil politicians were intimidated from participating in any conflict resolution with the Sri Lankan government. Other Tamil insurgent groups were infiltrated by hard core LTTE members, who then worked to fracture the organizations. When the time was ripe, Prabhakaran would order the death of the competition's leadership, after which the rank and file, and their weapons, could be absorbed into the LTTE.⁵¹ The Indian R & A was also successfully leveraged to provide support though later discarded when Indian instructions became overbearing. By 1987 Prabhakaran had established himself as the premier advocate for Tamil separatist aspirations and the unquestioned leader of the growing Tamil insurgency. Few could question his leadership without being killed. LTTE control expanded over much of the northern portion of the island.⁵²

Sri Lankan attempts to tamp down the insurgency were indifferent at first. The Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF) was not prepared to conduct a counterinsurgency operation. The LTTE's targeting of policemen led to the death or resignation of all Sinhalese officers in the Jaffna peninsula reducing the Sri Lankan regional intelligence and control of the population. Efforts to use Sinhalese paramilitary groups to counteract the Tamil insurgents were ineffective and proved counterproductive. The Sri Lankan Army slowly built up its strength while suffering numerous pinprick attacks from the LTTE. The insurgent attacks were designed more to hurt Sri Lankan morale and provoke overreaction by the security forces than cause actual harm. In 1985, under British and Israeli advice, the Sri Lanka government established a Joint Operations Center (JOC) to coordinate the counterinsurgency efforts of the Sri Lankan Army, Navy and Air Force. The JOC also retained representatives from the Internal Security ministry, Police Corps and the National Intelligence Bureau.⁵³

By 1987, the Sri Lankan government had amassed the necessary ability and forces to conduct a major offensive operation in LTTE controlled northern areas. The offensive began in the beginning of the year but tended to increase the civilian casualty rate without seriously affecting the LTTE. The increasing civilian casualty rate sparked Indian government protests to the Sri Lankan government to avoid any attempt at a military solution to the struggle. The Sri Lankan government ignored the Indian protests. In April an LTTE attack on a bus along the Trincomalee-Habarane road resulted in the murder of 127 Sinhalese passengers, while a car bomb explosion in Colombo killed 113. These attacks led to a heavy Sri Lankan military response.⁵⁴ During May 1987, the Sri Lankan Army substantially reinforced the northern offensive and poured into the Jaffna peninsula, clearing out suspected LTTE strong points and

⁵⁰. Ibid., 31-32.

⁵¹. Bandarage, 129.

⁵². Connor, 31-38.

⁵³. Ibid., 33.

⁵⁴. Bandarage, 129-130.

camps. Heavy firepower was used liberally, shredding LTTE units that attempted to hold ground against the assault. The Sri Lankan Air Force assisted the assault with bombing of LTTE positions. Civilian suffering caused by the Sri Lankan offensive was eagerly broadcast to the rest of the world by the LTTE propaganda teams.⁵⁵

By early June 1987, the LTTE was in disarray due to the ferocity of the Sri Lankan attacks, but Prabhakaran found an ally in the Indian government to deflect the heavy blows. Having warned the Sri Lankan government against the use of excessive force against the Tamils, Indian authorities turned a blind eye when local Tamil Nadu politicians attempted to send a flotilla of ships with humanitarian aid to their ethnic brethren in Jaffna on 3 June 1987. The Sri Lankan Navy turned these ships away from Jaffna, generating intense Indian criticism. The next day, Indian Air Force fighters escorted cargo planes that air dropped food supplies to the beleaguered Tamils in the Jaffna peninsula. Faced with Indian threats to intervene on behalf of the Tamils in the north and a possible new revolt by the reconstituted JVP in the south, the Sri Lanka government blinked and acceded to Indian diplomatic efforts to install a peace keeping force in the north of the island.⁵⁶

The account of the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) on Sri Lanka was not a happy one. The Indian Army initially deployed one lightly armed reserve infantry division to perform peacekeeping duties and separate the Sri Lankan Army from the Tamil insurgents. The insurgents were supposed to turn in their weapons in return for greater political clout in the northern regions. The LTTE was initially compliant with the interposed peacekeeping force, using the time to lick their wounds from the previous Sri Lankan offensive. The Tamil Tigers turned in their obsolescent arms and hid their more lethal weaponry. By September 1987 as the initial rush of exaltation subsided and Tamil-Sinhalese ethnic friction resumed, the IPKF found itself shifting from peacekeeping to peace enforcement duties. Seeking assistance from local police to gain intelligence on renewed LTTE violence, which was usually directed against rival Tamil groups, proved impossible and the IPKF soon found itself attempting to conduct peace enforcement operations with less restrictive Rules of Engagement (ROE).⁵⁷

After fifteen Tamil prisoners committed suicide following their capture by the Sri Lankan Navy, the LTTE began to strike back at the Indian Army. Acting as if the IPKF was culpable through their association with the government in Colombo, the LTTE initiated a new conflict with a new enemy. In response to the LTTE attacks, the Indian government, under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, changed the IPKF's mission for the third time in less than nine weeks. In October 1987 the IPKF launched its own major offensive operation in the Jaffna peninsula to fix and destroy the LTTE. The attack pushed the main LTTE forces back into the urban environs of Jaffna itself. The IPKF expended weeks of time and tons of ammunition to clear the city. Casualties were heavy, with company sized units of the Indian Army being annihilated in the labyrinth sections of the city. Perhaps 1000 civilians were killed and another 25,000 displaced as they fled the fighting. The LTTE retreated back into the jungles, battered, but still alive.⁵⁸

The IPKF spent the next three years attempting to defeat the LTTE in a confusing counterinsurgency operation in northern Sri Lanka. Reinforced to perhaps 100,000 soldiers, the Indian efforts were not successful. Indian exertions to win the hearts and minds of the Tamil

⁵⁵. Connor, 37-38.

⁵⁶. Ibid., 38-40.

⁵⁷. Scudieri, 20-22.

⁵⁸. Ibid., 24-26.

population were matched by missteps in human rights violations which were rapidly noted and exploited by LTTE propagandists, while insurgent atrocities received less rigorous coverage in the press. The LTTE was too nimble to fix and destroy, while a change in the Indian government caused a reappraisal of the Indian intervention. The IPKF was withdrawn in 1990 having suffered 1,115 Killed in Action (KIA), more dead than the Indian Army had suffered in its 1971 war with Pakistan. Upon withdrawal, the LTTE stepped into the political vacuum, seizing weapons abandoned by the IPKF, reoccupying Jaffna and resuming its war with the Sri Lankan government and other Tamil rivals.⁵⁹

Fresh from its suppression of the JVP in the south where perhaps 60,000 people had died, the Sri Lankan government was willing to renew the struggle against the LTTE. For the next decade, the government and the LTTE fought an „on again, off again“ war for national identity and union. Depending on the relative strengths of the combatants, the struggle waged up and down the north and eastern coasts of Sri Lanka, and up and down the spectrum of conflict. Both sides found it much easier to attack the soft targets of their adversary’s society than the respective military forces, and the neither side was able to inflict decisive defeats on their opponent. Prabhakaran’s cadres murdered policemen, assassinated political leaders, and ethnically cleansed non-Tamils from LTTE dominated areas. These crimes were matched by Sri Lankan military’s own human rights depredations. The net result of this tended to drive the Tamil population deeper into the deadly embrace of the LTTE.⁶⁰

Under Prabhakaran’s leadership, the LTTE generally pursued a Maoist strategy in the pursuit of Tamil independence.⁶¹ In the first phase of this type of insurgency the rebels would concentrate on the establishment of base areas where committed members of the movement could convince the local population to support the insurgents. Next, the growing movement would slowly but surely attrite the government forces through a campaign of sabotage and terrorism. Exposed military and police posts would be attacked and political leaders would further indoctrinate the people in newly liberated regions. As the insurgent military forces increased in strength, guerilla actions would be supplanted by conventional military operations designed to destroy the enemy army. The flexibility of this doctrine, permitting the coexistence of multiple phases of the insurgency as well as the progression or regression of rebel political and military activity, had well served resistance movements throughout the globe.⁶²

LTTE military operations in the north of the island were focused on the capture of the city of Jaffna, the political and cultural center of Tamil society.⁶³ Operations in the North Eastern Province attempted to eradicate the Sri Lankan government’s presence there and establish the LTTE as the only legitimate political authority. Activity shifted from the urban areas of Jaffna to the jungles of the rural areas depending upon the relative strengths of the combatants. Low level violence and political subversion would be emphasized until the insurgent forces could regenerate combat power. Major attacks against Sri Lankan conventional forces were carefully planned and rehearsed by the LTTE forces. The LTTE could not maintain a high operational tempo as the insurgent logistic reserves and manpower pool were incapable of supporting continuous conventional operations. The LTTE usually required periods of lower

⁵⁹. Ibid., 24-39.

⁶⁰. Bandarage, 152-155.

⁶¹. Connor, 87.

⁶². Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975): 357.

⁶³. Fair, 59.

military activity between their major attacks. Sri Lankan authorities often mistook these operational pauses as indications of LTTE interest in pursuing less violent means to attain increased political influence. LTTE operations tended to be closely tied to political events in the Sri Lankan capital as Prabhakaran acted to exploit any fissure in the government's resolve to suppress the Tamil insurgency. The LTTE forces would melt back into the jungle if the casualties for the cadres became too high or the pressure by Sri Lankan forces too much to bear.⁶⁴ Over time the surviving cadre members were able to profit from their tactical experience and attain a marked battlefield superiority that required the heavy firepower of the Sri Lankan forces to mitigate.

LTTE suicide operations commenced in the late 1980s and bloomed into attacks with strategic significance in the 1990s. The LTTE became the world's leading authority on the use of suicide bombers to assassinate foreign and domestic politicians (former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was killed in 1992; the Sri Lankan President Ranasanghe Premadasa was assassinated in 1993), Sri Lankan military leaders (the Sri Lankan Navy Chief Clancey Fernando was killed in 1993), as well as wayward Tamil authorities who failed to show the proper devotion to the cause. Other suicide attacks targeted vital Sri Lankan infrastructure, both symbolic and physical, including the Colombo International Airport and historic Buddhist Temples.⁶⁵ These attacks were difficult for the Sri Lankan authorities to prevent and exhibited the ability of the LTTE to destroy targets of vital significance to the Sri Lankan government and population. The war in the northern jungles against the Tamils might be annoying and irritating, but the suicide attacks by the Black Tigers, the LTTE's suicide attack department, brought the violence straight to the capital for the entire population to experience. The suicide attacks disrupted the Sri Lankan government's ability to conduct counterinsurgency operations by killing the nation's senior military and political leadership, degrading the economy and sapping the population's morale.⁶⁶ Low morale made it more difficult to recruit personnel to pursue the war in the north.⁶⁷ This combination of low level guerilla activity, punctuated by high intensity combat and vicious suicide attacks on the Sinhalese homeland made the LTTE a force that the Sri Lankan government had great difficulty neutralizing.

Early in the conflict, LTTE leadership recognized the advantage of attaining a maritime capability to advance the revolution. Infiltration of arms and personnel across the Palk Strait was susceptible to Sri Lankan Navy interdiction. Manning Israeli built *Dvora* class patrol craft, the Sri Lankan Navy sunk or captured many LTTE vessels. Faced with this threat, Prabhakaran directed the creation of the LTTE's maritime force, the Sea Tigers, in 1984.⁶⁸

The LTTE had a geographic command and control organization that was divided into seven divisions. Each of the seven divisions was commanded by a district commander directly responsible to Prabhakaran. The districts had both political and military portions with specialized functional commands. The Sea Tigers occupied one of the LTTE's seven specialized departments. The Sea Tigers initially possessed only a few small vessels with an indifferent armament, but rapidly grew into a formidable force capable of supporting LTTE missions in the maritime environment. During their zenith, the Sea Tigers fielded over 3000 members and

⁶⁴. Bandarage, 120-121, 146.

⁶⁵. Fair, 37-42.

⁶⁶. Raj Vijayasiri, "A Critical Analysis of the Sri Lankan Government's Counterinsurgency Campaign" (master's thesis, Fort Leavenworth, KS: United States Army Command and General Staff College, 1999), 20.

⁶⁷. Fair, 43.

⁶⁸. "Maritime Threat: Tactics and Technology of the Sea Tigers," Jane's Intelligence Review, 1 June 2006.

conducted operations from the littoral seas of Sri Lanka to the deep ocean areas of the Indian Ocean.⁶⁹

The Sea Tigers were divided into two groups. The first was responsible for all tactical actions in and around Sri Lanka while the other operated the LTTE's fleet of ocean going merchant ships that delivered supplies to the insurgents. With close ties to the LTTE's women's directorate (30% of Sea Tiger personnel were female), the naval intelligence organization (a portion of the intelligence directorate) and the Black Tigers (the LTTE suicide operations branch), the Sea Tigers had a table of organization not dissimilar to any modern naval force. The Sea Tiger establishment was comprised of thirteen sections, including such elements as the Sea Battle „Regiments“ that controlled the cadre members when they were assigned waterborne or ground combat duties, Underwater Demolition Teams, Sea Tiger Strike Groups for seaborne raids, and a Radar and Telecommunications Unit. The shore infrastructure consisted of a Marine Engineering and Boat Building Section, a Maritime School and Academy, a Recruiting Section, and sections to support ordnance, personnel and logistics. A Reconnaissance and Intelligence Section provided operational level information to the Sea Tiger command, while the Exclusive Economic Zone-Marine Logistics Support Team (EEZ-MLST) provided the transport for the armaments and supplies acquired off island.⁷⁰

Soosai (birth name: Thillaiambalam Sivanesan) became the commander of the Sea Tigers in 1991 following a decade of loyal service to Prabhakaran and previous experience as district deputy commander.⁷¹ Under his leadership, the Sea Tigers were able to hold the Sri Lankan Navy at bay in the struggle for sea control around the island.



Head of the Sea Tigers, Colonel Soosai (right).⁷²

⁶⁹. The other departments were political, military, intelligence, women, finance and equipment procurement. Will Hartley, 426-427.

⁷⁰. Hartley, 427.

⁷¹. Ibid., 426-427.

⁷². About Tigers Finished as a Military Force. International Military Forums. <http://www.military-quotes.com/forum/tigers-finished-military-force-t74958.html> (accessed 10 December 2010).

The Sea Tiger order of battle was not impressive by the standards of any conventional navy, but what the Sea Tiger vessel inventory lacked in terms of displacement was more than compensated for by the ferocity and audacity of their crews. Without large scale shipyards, the insurgents had to build a navy by scratch, often in jungle workshops using off the shelf components. Gluing together a fiberglass maritime force designed by unemployed Tamil engineering graduates, the Sea Tiger fleet was mainly comprised of the following indigenously built vessel types:

- The four man *Thrikka* class, armed with a single machine gun and used to deploy combat divers. This craft could reach speeds of approximately 45 knots.
- The six man *Suddai* class, armed with a single machine gun and used to attack naval vessels. This vessel had a top speed of approximately 10 knots.
- The *Muraj* class, usually armed with three machine guns and used for attacks on naval vessels, logistic runs and amphibious assaults. This craft had a crew of ten to fourteen sailors and had a top speed of approximately 45 knots.
- The two man *Idayan* class armed with explosives and used for suicide attacks on maritime targets.⁷³

These home constructed vessels had very low superstructures and an angular construction which tended to maximize their stealthy characteristics.⁷⁴

The Sea Tigers extensively modified their vessels to increase their range and lethality. Their most successful vessels were perhaps the fast attack craft of the Exclusive Economic Zone Marine Logistics Support Team (EEZ-MLST). This force consisted of approximately a dozen *Muraj* class vessels. Armed with multiple 23 mm cannon, four 12.7 mm machine guns, Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) and other useful ordnance, these vessels were used to escort the LTTE's mobile ocean going warehouses during logistic runs to the insurgents. The Sea Tiger vessels had a superior electronic suite compared to adversary SLN vessels.⁷⁵

The Sea Tigers also made extensive use of captured material. A *Dvora* class patrol boat taken from the SLN was added to the Sea Tiger inventory.⁷⁶ The EEZ-MLST train of ocean going supply ships was procured through a combination of piracy and shady business deals. The eleven "Sea Pigeon" merchant vessels provided a burgeoning sea base for the Tamil insurgency.⁷⁷ Supplies were procured all over the world through the offices of the LTTE procurement directorate run by Tharmalingham Shunmugham (alias Kumaran Pathmanathan or "KP"). The material was shipped in Sea Pigeon ships to seaports in compliant nations (often Thailand or Cambodia) where it was combat loaded for follow on shipment. Subsequent transshipment of this material to LTTE controlled areas on Sri Lanka from the Sea Pigeon holds was conducted using smaller vessels.⁷⁸ On their final approach to the shore, LTTE electronic

⁷³. Hartley, 424-425.

⁷⁴. Martin N. Murphy, "Maritime Threat: Tactics and Technology of the Sea Tigers," Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/documentView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/mags/jir/history/jir2006/jir01489.htm@current&pageSelected=allJanes&keyword=sea tigers&backPath=http://jtic.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/search&Prod_Name=&activeNav=http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC (accessed 13 July 2010).

⁷⁵. Ibid.

⁷⁶. Hartley, 424.

⁷⁷. Martin N. Murphy, "The Blue, Green and Brown: Insurgency and Counter-insurgency on the Water," Contemporary Security Policy 28, no. 1 (April 2007): 64.

⁷⁸. Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau and David Brannan, *Trend in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*, RAND Report MR-1405 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), 117-122.

warfare units on the coast monitored SLN units in the vicinity, determining the enemy's operating posture and positions.⁷⁹ Escorted by the EEZ-MLST fast attack craft as well as the other small craft of the Sea Tiger Sea Battle Regiments, the smaller supply vessels delivered the material to LTTE controlled areas. Keeping the LTTE sea lines of communication (SLOC) open allowed the secure delivery of arms and ammunition to keep the military units of the LTTE fully operational.⁸⁰ When not occupied by wartime duties, the Sea Pigeon ships raised money for the LTTE by transporting legal cargo and by illicit activities such as running drugs and human trafficking.⁸¹

The Sea Tiger activities extended below the surface of the Indian Ocean as well. While efforts to buy or build miniature submarines were ultimately unsuccessful, the innovative engineers of the Sea Tigers built floating mines that were used in Trincomalee harbor and off the Sri Lankan coast to hinder SLN operations and damage the Sri Lankan maritime commerce. The Sea Tigers also developed a combat diver capability. In the 1990s members received training in underwater sabotage, allegedly by Norwegian naval instructors.⁸² Rebreather equipment for clandestine diver attacks was purchased to allow stealthy approaches.⁸³ Semisubmersible „human torpedoes“ were constructed and jet skis that could be packed with explosives were purchased for use by the Black Sea Tigers, the maritime component of the LTTE's crack suicide department.⁸⁴ Somewhat surprisingly given their sophistication, the Sea Tigers did not have an air element.

Training for Sea Tiger personnel was rigorous with a large component of political indoctrination. Residents of the coastal fishing communities, many Sea Tiger recruits already had some maritime experience. LTTE basic training lasted for four months, with additional specialized training for naval occupations. The initial training for all recruits was segregated, although all military billets were open to both males and females. The LTTE also had a continuing training program to refresh the battlefield prowess of cadre members and keep them current regarding tactical and technological lessons learned.⁸⁵ The LTTE also expended a fair amount of energy to recruit women for roles in the ranks of the armed forces.⁸⁶ Very young Tamils (some as young as 13) were also pressed into service to fill the ranks as the long running insurgency depleted LTTE manpower.⁸⁷ Recovered cadre members with amputations were retrained as suicide vehicle crewmen in an attempt to make the best use of all available human capital.⁸⁸

⁷⁹. Rohan Kumar Gunaratna, "Changing Nature of Warfare: LTTE at the Razor's Edge" (master's thesis, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1997), 191.

⁸⁰. Hartley, 425.

⁸¹. Martin N. Murphy, "The Blue, Green and Brown: Insurgency and Counter-insurgency on the Water," *Contemporary Security Policy* 28, no. 1 (April 2007): 72.

⁸². Fair, 36.

⁸³. Martin N. Murphy, "Maritime Threat: Tactics and Technology of the Sea Tigers," *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre*, [http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/documentView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/mags/jir/history/jir2006/jir01489.htm@current&pageSelected=allJanes&keyword=sea tigers&backPath=http://jtic.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/search&Prod_Name=&activeNav=http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC](http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/documentView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/mags/jir/history/jir2006/jir01489.htm@current&pageSelected=allJanes&keyword=sea%20tigers&backPath=http://jtic.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/search&Prod_Name=&activeNav=http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC) (accessed 13 July 2010).

⁸⁴. Hartley, 424-425.

⁸⁵. *Ibid.*, 426.

⁸⁶. Fair, 25.

⁸⁷. Rohan Gunaratna, "Tiger Cubs and Childhood Fall as Casualties in Sri Lanka," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (1 July 1998): 32.

⁸⁸. Fair, 39.

New Tamil Tiger recruits were indoctrinated that martyrdom was a vital component of LTTE military culture. Members were lectured that death in battle was equally compatible with martyrdom in the service of the cause of Tamil independence. Cadre members went into battle with a capsule of cyanide to prevent capture by government forces, should tactical situations deteriorate beyond retrieval.⁸⁹ Military cemeteries were maintained and Prabhakaran established the annual holiday celebration of “Great Heroes Day” to honor the sacrifices of the fallen.⁹⁰

The Black Sea Tigers made use of all of LTTE’s capabilities to conduct their attacks. Their first suicide attack in 1990 resulted in the deaths of 6 Sri Lankan servicemen (as well as the 4 Black Sea Tigers) and minor damage to a SLN vessel in Trincomalee harbor. In April 1996 another suicide craft attacked targets in Colombo but only resulted in the deaths of the Black Sea Tigers when their raid was prematurely discovered. As they mastered their procedures, the Black Sea Tigers became more lethal. In 1998 the Black Tigers scored their first success attacking a convoy off of the northern coast of Sri Lanka, damaging two SLN vessels and killing over 50 Sri Lankan soldiers. In August 1999 another patrol craft was damaged by suicide craft and in 2001 an oil tanker was hit and damaged but was able to return to port.⁹¹ Black Sea Tiger combat divers were more proficient. Suicide scuba divers blew up two SLN fast attack craft in April 1994 while an attack in July in the next year sank one vessel and damaged another.⁹²



Black Sea Tiger suicide attack vessels.⁹³

Sea Tiger tactics were carefully crafted to use all of the available assets in the area of operations; necessity truly was the mother of invention. While the normal mission profile varied depending upon the assigned task, Sea Tiger operations often involved a “swarm” of both conventional and suicide fast attack craft. Three conventional craft would often operate in a „V“

⁸⁹. Ibid., 37.

⁹⁰. Ibid., 46.

⁹¹. Sources vary on the dates and level of destruction of the various Black Sea Tiger attacks. While LTTE reports on casualties were alleged to be more accurate, Black Sea Tiger after action reports are typically nonexistent. These incidents come from an amalgam from Connor, 58-86 and “Suicide Attacks by the LTTE,” South Asia Intelligence Review, Sri Lanka Datasheets, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/shrilanka/database/data_suicide_killings.htm (accessed 14 July 2010).

⁹². Connor, 58-60.

⁹³. Charles Ratnam, “Sea tigers strike back as Sri Lanka declares them as spent force (Update 1 - Tamil Tiger claim),” *Tamil Eelam New Service* 22 October 2008. http://www.tamileelamnews.com/news/publish/tns_10273.shtml (accessed 10 December 2010).

formation allowing for ease of command and control. The vessels would wait among the myriad fishing vessels in the shallow coastal waters of Sri Lanka. Upon detecting the SLN units, the Sea Tigers would accelerate toward the enemy, concentrating their fire on one target and attempting to shoot out its engines, hoping to disable the vessel and then move in for the kill. Black Sea Tiger Suicide vessels also operated in threes, attempting to coordinate their ramming attacks with gun fire from the conventional vessels. Operating in concert with conventional Sea Tiger attack craft made it challenging for SLN units to classify the nature of the threat until it was too late. Upon completion of their mission, the Sea Tiger vessels would be beached and then pulled onto trailers where they could be hidden back in the jungle. Neither side showed particular interest in collecting survivors of any naval encounter. The combination of speed, firepower and suicide tactics made it very difficult for the larger, deeper draft and less numerous SLN units to handle the Sea Tiger attacks.⁹⁴ Using such tactics, the Sea Tigers sunk the SLN's largest warship, the Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) *Sagarawardana* in September 1994.⁹⁵ Even accounting for the anticipated losses of the Black Sea Tiger suicide craft, the naval attrition favored the LTTE. During the 1990s perhaps a third to one half of the SLN's combatants were destroyed by the Sea Tigers.⁹⁶ These losses decreased the service's capabilities and reduced service morale. The Sea Tigers were thus able to achieve local sea control for resupply missions and hold Sri Lankan sea lines of communication to Jaffna at risk.



A SLN *Dvora* Fast attack craft sinks following an attack by the Sea Tigers.⁹⁷

The Sea Tigers worked in close coordination with the LTTE's military and political operations. This effectiveness was assisted by the flat command and control structure of the LTTE as well as the devotion of the LTTE's leadership to Prabhakaran. When the LTTE conducted major attacks, the Sea Tigers were carefully integrated into the operation to enhance the insurgent combat power. An LTTE amphibious attack on Sri Lankan positions at Elephant Pass in November 1995 caused over a thousand Sri Lankan Army casualties and captured

⁹⁴. Martin N. Murphy, "Maritime Threat: Tactics and Technology of the Sea Tigers," Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/documentView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/mags/jir/history/jir2006/jir01489.htm@current&pageSelected=allJanes&keyword=sea tigers&backPath=http://jtic.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/search&Prod_Name=&activeNav=http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC (accessed 13 July 2010).

⁹⁵. Hartley, 423.

⁹⁶. Ibid., 423.

⁹⁷. Sea Tigers Of "TAMIL" Tiger Land Unique And Powerful. YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3ql5pNvCJs> (accessed 19 July 2010).

numerous small arms and ammunition as well as two tanks.⁹⁸ The ability to conduct combined operations was forcibly demonstrated a year later in June 1996 when the LTTE overran an isolated Sri Lankan Army base on the east coast of the island at Mulaitivu. The well fortified base was defended by two battalions of infantry and a battery of artillery. Attacking at night under an intense mortar barrage, LTTE cadre members attacked the north of the base while the Sea Tigers simultaneously conducted an amphibious assault across the eastern beaches. LTTE sappers destroyed the brigade headquarters and artillery positions, further disrupting the defense of the base. By daylight, the Sri Lankan Army positions had been fatally compromised. SLN attempts to reinforce the base by sea were thwarted by Sea Tiger fast attack vessels with Black Sea Tiger suicide craft in support. A Sri Lankan Special Operations Force parachute drop and helicopter assault was similarly contained with the relieving forces suffering heavy casualties. The next day the Sri Lankan forces evacuated the base, having suffered upwards of 1600 casualties. LTTE casualties were heavy as well, with perhaps 800 cadre members killed, though huge amounts of military stores were captured. The victory showed the ability of the insurgents to carefully coordinate naval and land forces and achieve a hard fought victory over the poorly led Sri Lankan forces.⁹⁹

Later in 1997 the Sea Tigers and LTTE ground forces raided Trincomalee harbor. A force of 4 suicide boats entered the harbor while LTTE ground forces bombarded Sri Lankan defenses with mortars and rockets. The SLN destroyed two of the intruders, but the others hit and sank an amphibious assault craft. A Sri Lankan Hind Attack helicopter was shot down as it responded to the attack. The LTTE filmed the attacks and quickly disseminated the footage onto the internet as indications of their military superiority.¹⁰⁰

The Sri Lankan Army's hold on Jaffna was tenuous at times during the 1990s. With the ground cadres of the LTTE interdicting the roads leading to the city, the SLN was tasked to defend the shipping bringing supplies to the forces in the beleaguered city. The Sea Tigers attacked this shipping, trying to cut the sea lines of communications and isolate the Sri Lankan forces in Jaffna. The Sea Tiger's sea denial actions may appear limited by the size and small numbers of vessels involved, but the conceptual underpinning of their operations was solid. The Sea Tigers also targeted merchant shipping in Sri Lankan waters both to harm the Sri Lankan economy as well as to seize vessels and cargo that could be used by the insurgent forces. The Sea Tigers hijacked a cruise liner in 1996, releasing most of the crew under a negotiated deal with the government.¹⁰¹ Further attacks on Sri Lankan and foreign flagged vessel throughout the 1990s provided additional assistance for the LTTE.¹⁰² In 1997 a seaborne shipment of mortar shells bound for the Sri Lankan Army was intercepted. This prize restocked the artillery magazines of the LTTE ground forces allowing greater expenditure of ammunition in subsequent attacks against government forces.¹⁰³

⁹⁸. Connor, 58.

⁹⁹. Vijayasiri, 42-47.

¹⁰⁰. Connor, 76.

¹⁰¹. Ibid., 61.

¹⁰². Hartley, 423.

¹⁰³. Connor, 68.



Sri Lankan Navy Fast Attack Craft escort the converted passenger ship *Jetliner*. Maritime forces were instrumental in supplying the Sri Lankan forces in the besieged port of Jaffna.¹⁰⁴

Like most guerillas, the LTTE was effective in procuring supplies from a wide variety of sources. The Indian R & AW provided arms in the late 1980s while even the Sri Lankan government provided assistance during the IPKF's peace operations from 1987-1990. Captured or abandoned Indian and Sri Lanka Army weaponry and equipment helped supplement the table of organization and equipment of the LTTE insurgents. Seizure of enemy shipping also provided new revenue streams and seaborne transport for the Tamil insurgents. While necessary, these sources were not sufficient to meet the LTTE's expansive concept of operations. The Tamil diaspora, made up of Tamils that had fled the island at the commencement of hostilities in the early 1980s and settled in western nations, became responsible in large part for providing the funds to buy other armaments and keep Prabhakaran's cadres in operation. The LTTE was able to make effective use of these expatriate Tamils to create a virtual lifeline for the embattled insurgents in Sri Lanka.

The Tamil diaspora was also effective in amplifying LTTE propaganda in western nations. The LTTE propaganda maintained constant and consistent themes that the Sri Lankan government was constantly oppressing the Tamils, that the LTTE was the only group capable of defending against these assaults, and that peace in Sri Lanka would be elusive until the Tamils had achieved true independence. Media outlets, aid organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were often willing to believe the stories of human rights violations committed by the Sri Lankan military but tended to ignore equally compelling claims of LTTE atrocities. LTTE messages were promulgated using the new electronic avenues on the internet as well as the more traditional mailings, television and radio shows, and social and political meetings. The meetings helped sway sympathetic support in the west as well as keep committed Tamils focused on the cause. The success stories of the insurgency were exploited to promote international legitimacy for the insurgents.¹⁰⁵ Videos of the destruction of Sri Lanka aircraft and warships helped create enthusiasm and promote continued attachment of the diaspora members for the national aspirations of the oppressed minority remaining on the island.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ . "Jetliner': a novel experience for foreign and local tourists," Sunday Observer, <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2010/02/07/fin60.asp> (accessed 6 April 2011).

¹⁰⁵ . Byam, et. al. 41-46.

¹⁰⁶ . Connor, 76.

Such enthusiasm generated money for the insurgents. Fund raising meshed well with political activism and certain individuals came to be relied on to provide large sums of money for the LTTE. Diaspora members who were less motivated could still be encouraged to contribute through more direct canvassing, with coercion and sometimes actual violence being effective ways to encourage donations. Non-governmental organization contributions to humanitarian causes on Sri Lanka were also siphoned off to support the LTTE's growing arsenal. Legitimate businesses founded by the LTTE contributed a portion of their profits to the LTTE coffers. Human trafficking, often to Canada, provided another way for the LTTE to generate income to fund their war machine. It is suggested that perhaps 90-95% of LTTE's total financial support came from these overseas operations.¹⁰⁷

Sri Lankan government attempts to mitigate the LTTE efforts or propagate their own messages were not effective. Lacking insight into the opportunities of the new media and without an external group to circulate their themes, the Sri Lankan responses were hesitant and uncoordinated.¹⁰⁸ In the West, Sri Lankan violence was considered excessive and inhumane, while LTTE atrocities were considered acceptable behavior by a subjugated minority yearning to achieve political independence. Nations where the Tamil diaspora resided showed little inclination to limit LTTE extracurricular activities.¹⁰⁹

With money in the bank, the LTTE's arms procurement directorate, under the resourceful Kumaran Pathmanathan ("KP"), was tasked by Prabhakaran to procure and ship war materiel to the LTTE controlled areas on Sri Lanka. Weapon purchases across the globe allowed KP and his trusted subordinates to provide the LTTE the necessary small arms and ammunition to maintain the combat effectiveness of the insurgents for decades. As the capabilities of the LTTE matured, KP was ordered to buy a greater number of higher quality weapons to support Prabhakaran's operational vision. Most of the material was first shipped to bases in Thailand, where it could be organized for combat loading on the Sea Pigeon fleet. Foreign observers noted that Thailand had become the favored forward operating base for the LTTE. "A nation where plentiful foreign tourists and businessmen make blending in easy, Thailand provides access to several former war zones and their surplus weaponry. It offers excellent communications and a short sea hop to Sri Lanka. And, as elsewhere in the region, money can buy cooperation in high places."¹¹⁰

Effective propaganda motivated an external population to financially support the LTTE war effort, providing the funds to buy more war material to support the struggle. The Sea Tigers achieved local sea control to bring this material into the theater of operations. This in turn increased the overall combat potential of the insurgents, allowing them to field more powerful conventional forces as well as conduct devastating suicide attacks against compelling enemy targets. Success on the battlefield and targeted assassinations of enemies of the insurgency allowed the LTTE propaganda arm to sound the trumpet more loudly, further generating international support for the cause of Tamil independence. Persistent combat operations around Jaffna kept the Sri Lankan Army from building up the required combat power to suppress the uprising. An insurgency that might not otherwise have been sustainable was thus made possible

¹⁰⁷. Byam, et. al. 49-54.

¹⁰⁸. Ibid., 41-46.

¹⁰⁹. Ibid., 57-59.

¹¹⁰. Anthony Davis. Tracking Tigers in Phuket. Asiaweek.com.
<http://www.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/magazine/2000/0616/nat.security.html> (accessed 13 December 2010).

through these linked activities.¹¹¹ Prabhakaran, not usually mentioned as a seapower evangelist, could rightly be viewed as an able practitioner who used a wide array of maritime forces to keep his vision of Tamil independence alive.

A Violent Ceasefire: Sri Lanka 2002-2006

As the new millennia began, both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan armed forces showed signs of impending culmination. On the Sri Lankan side, the Army was suffering from both the increased LTTE proficiency in conventional warfare as well as incessant guerilla attacks. Morale was poor and the Army was concerned that the LTTE might even retake Jaffna. The Sri Lankan Navy continued to be hard pressed by the Sea Tigers. National confidence was low as the Sinhalese population was tired from the effects of the bitter war. Suicide attacks at the Colombo Air Port in July 2001 had destroyed eight Sri Lankan Air Force jets and three civilian aircraft which was a substantial blow against the Sri Lankan Air Force. The attack also devastated the civilian tourist industry, causing a 90% reduction in tourism in the succeeding months. Political leaders had been targeted by the Black Tigers and an assassination of the Sri Lankan President had only narrowly been averted. For good measures, the ever resilient JVP had arisen from the ashes to become a recognized political party, only to throw its support to the government's parliamentary opposition.¹¹²

The LTTE was also strained after two decades of combat. Casualties in 2001 had been heavy, requiring the increased use of women and child soldiers to make up the losses. The LTTE had little ability to counteract the punishing Sri Lanka Air Force attacks, which had precipitated the suicide assault on the Colombo airport. Deep penetration raids into LTTE strongholds by the Sri Lankan Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) had also come perilously close to killing Prabhakaran and significantly, the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda in the United States had shifted the playing field. Terror groups were now perceived as a global problem that demanded international cooperation.¹¹³

At the end of December 2001 the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government conducted a ceasefire agreement under the aegis of Norwegian shuttle diplomacy. The sides had arranged previous ceasefires over the course of the insurgency, but none had ever been more than a transitory state between new bouts of violent conflict. The December elections had gone against the ruling Sri Lankan party, the United National Party (UNP), and only through the support of the new Tamil National Alliance (TNA) was the UNP able to hold on to power. As the TNA was heavily influenced by the LTTE, this Faustian bargain resulted in the UNP agreeing to participate in the Norwegian proposals.¹¹⁴

The ceasefire arrangement was very favorable to the LTTE. The agreement provided increased international legitimacy to the Tamil insurgents. Demarcation lines between the government and the insurgents provided the LTTE with de facto control over much of the North and Eastern provinces, although Jaffna remained under governmental authority. The LTTE was permitted to set up local political structures in its areas, granting a measure of political autonomy to the region. LTTE personnel were also free to move into Sri Lankan government held areas for

¹¹¹. Martin N. Murphy, "The Blue, Green and Brown: Insurgency and Counter-insurgency on the Water," Contemporary Security Policy 28, no. 1 (April 2007): 74.

¹¹². Connor, 75-85.

¹¹³. Ibid., 75-85.

¹¹⁴. Bandarage, 176-178.

“political work,” including the indoctrination and education of the population, though Sri Lanka authorities did not have the same privileges in LTTE controlled areas. The agreement did not require LTTE military forces to be dismantled, but did proscribe the disarming of non-LTTE Tamil militias. Acts of violence against civilians were banned, but the recruitment of child soldiers and forced impressments of Tamils by the LTTE was not. No enforcement mechanisms were included in the ceasefire documents.¹¹⁵ Sri Lankan SOF raids were halted, and an exchange of prisoners between the adversaries was conducted.¹¹⁶ The Tigers were permitted to freely operate a „Voice of Tigers“ radio station in the north, which was used to transmit the LTTE calls for greater autonomy and independence.¹¹⁷ The Sri Lankan government received little in return from the LTTE. Convinced by the foreign diplomats that the war against the Tamil insurgency was essentially unwinnable, the Sri Lankan government appeared to roll over on the LTTE demands.¹¹⁸ The ceasefire agreement was mainly welcomed by the population in the government controlled areas in Sri Lanka as the people viewed the cessation of violence as a step towards conflict resolution.¹¹⁹ Prabhakaran quickly hedged on his initial proclamation to reconsider possible Tamil regional authority. In a press conference in April 2002 he reiterated his commitment to the Tamil homeland with himself as the leader, stating that he should be shot if he ever wavered from this objective.¹²⁰

LTTE intransigence on this point would be the rock against which the discussions over the next four year would flounder. Six rounds of negotiations in 2002 and 2003 failed to reach agreement on any core issue between the LTTE and Sri Lankan government. LTTE demands for the unhindered access of Sea Tiger ships to LTTE controlled areas were rebuffed by the Sri Lankan government.¹²¹ The Sri Lankan scheme for a provincial administrative structure was rejected out of hand by the LTTE, while the LTTE proposals for an interim government leading to possible independence were never seriously considered by the Colombo government.¹²² The only issue the sides could agree on was the prohibition of any investigation of the human rights violations allegedly committed by either side. By April 2003 the sides had reached an impasse and the LTTE suspended the discussions, though not the ceasefire. Unwilling to recommence major hostilities, both sides used the available time to prepare for the next round of the conflict.¹²³

The period from 2002 to 2006 was thus an uneven one in terms of the level of conflict in the insurgency. The LTTE took advantage of the ceasefire to reequip and retrain its depleted forces. Arms were acquired on the international market and shipped to the island, where LTTE cadres expanded in size and lethality. The LTTE expanded its shadow administration of Tamil controlled areas and infiltrated forces to occupy strategic locations around Trincomalee.¹²⁴ Losses in the Sea Tigers were made up and fresh volunteers trained for future long range suicide

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 182-185.

¹¹⁶ Connor, 84-85.

¹¹⁷ Hartley, 426.

¹¹⁸ Bandarage, 177.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 189.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 184.

¹²¹ Patrick B. Baetjer, “An Alternative View: Sri Lanka’s Experience with an Enduring Insurgency,” in *The Interagency and Counterinsurgency Warfare: Stability, Security, Transition and Reconstruction Roles*, ed. Joseph R. Cerami and Jay W. Boggs (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army War College, 2007), 244.

¹²² Bandarage, 185-187.

¹²³ Ibid., 186.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 189-190.

missions by the Black Tigers. Even a new air wing, the Air Tigers, was organized to provide a new capability for the LTTE forces.¹²⁵ While Prabhakaran had not achieved true independence for the Tamils, he had essentially achieved all the trappings of a Tamil state for his insurgents.

Yet all was not well in the insurgent ranks, and a number of events took place during this period that would prove costly to the LTTE's future survival. Prabhakaran had always used ceasefire agreements as mere tactical ploys to improve the strength of his forces, to be abrogated when they were no longer viewed as productive.¹²⁶ This ceasefire agreement was no different, only now the lower end of the spectrum of conflict became the focal area of activity. Ceasefire violations increased over time as the LTTE used limited violence and propaganda to increase their hold on occupied areas while further eroding the authority of the Sri Lankan government. Small scale attacks began to increase in frequency while the LTTE's campaign to silence all internal dissent was maintained.¹²⁷

Not all of this was successful. In March 2004, a LTTE regional commander, "Colonel" Karuna (Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan) defected to the Sri Lankan government. Karuna's forces had occupied the eastern provinces around Trincomalee. With his defection, Prabhakaran lost thousands of experienced cadre members and a large recruiting district and operating area. The LTTE political infrastructure and financial ventures in the regions were fatally compromised. Prabhakaran directed the immediate purge of all suspected Karuna sympathizers in the other LTTE departments. While Karuna had not been a sterling proponent of human rights, the Sri Lankan government welcomed him back into the legitimate political process and used his defection to attack the LTTE claim of being the sole voice of Tamil aspirations.¹²⁸ Karuna also proved to be a valuable source of information regarding the LTTE organization for his new masters in Colombo.¹²⁹ Prabhakaran was somehow unable to strike and destroy his erstwhile subordinate as he had previously been able to depose of unwanted or untrustworthy subordinates.¹³⁰

The Tamil Tigers were further harmed by the tsunami that lashed across the Indian Ocean on 26 December 2004. Tamil areas in the north and east were heavily damaged by the tidal wave and perhaps 35,000 Sri Lankans were killed. The Sri Lankan government cooperated with the LTTE to deliver relief to distressed inhabitants, though the Tigers tried to control the flow of aid and information in their regions. The Post Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) was created to allow the government and the LTTE to work directly with the victims of the tsunami and provide aid. The cooperation was short lived. Domestic politics in Colombo resulted in a judicial finding that the P-TOMS was not permissible under the Sri Lankan constitution and the program foundered in 2005.¹³¹

The disbanding of the P-TOMS tended to strengthen the LTTE's claim that the government was not really interested in the plight of suffering Tamils and should have buttressed the Tiger's hold on the area. Yet the tsunami had also seriously attrited the Tiger's ranks. Thousands of Sea Tiger cadre members were lost, and hundreds of boats had been destroyed.

¹²⁵ Hartley, 424.

¹²⁶ Bandarage, 186.

¹²⁷ Charu Lata Hogg, "Bloodthirsty Mutation," *The World Today*, 62, no. 3 (March 2006): 15-16.

¹²⁸ D. B. S. Jeyaraj, "Tiger vs Tiger," *Frontline*, 21, no. 7 (March 27, 2004).

¹²⁹ <http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl2107/stories/20040409004501700.htm> (accessed 8 July 2010).

¹³⁰ Baetjer, 245.

¹³¹ Jeyaraj.

¹³¹ Baetjer, 245-246.

The main Sea Tiger base at Mullaitivu was heavily damaged and numerous radar stations were washed away. Other assessments provided lower levels of Sea Tiger losses and suggested that since the standard Sea Tiger combatant was built out of fiberglass and wood, it should have been relatively easy to rebuild the fleet following this disaster.¹³² What could not be easily replaced were the armaments and other vessel components as well as the able seamen. For the Sea Tigers, these were the more serious losses.

In mid 2004, national elections were held in Sri Lanka. Sinhalese nationalist parties regained strength in this election, including a new party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which was opposed to the Norwegian peace process. Initially however the new government followed in the steps of their predecessor, while attempting to make the peace process more transparent. The subsequent election in November 2005 of President Mahinda Rajapaksa marked a further milestone in the hardening of the Sri Lankan government against the continued LTTE insurgency and an acceptance that a higher level of conflict would be required to pursue victory.¹³³ The question of which side had best used the time of the cease fire agreement to prepare for the next round of warfare would now be answered.

Sri Lanka Triumphant: Ebb Tide For The Sea Tigers And The End Of The Ltte

We are not a big navy; we had to improvise and use innovation and ingenuity to get our job done.

- Vice Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda, Commander of the Sri Lankan Navy

The combat record of the Sri Lanka Navy (SLN) during the first two decades of the war was not a particularly inspiring one. The Navy began the conflict primarily as a ceremonial force with coastal duties of fishery protection, search and rescue, and civic action during national emergencies.¹³⁴ Most of the ships were small patrol craft with a few larger offshore patrol vessels and amphibious craft. The vessels were mainly of either indigenous construction or acquired from the PRC, while a dozen *Dvora* Fast Attack craft were procured from Israel in the mid 1980s. The Navy's major naval base was located at Trincomalee with minor facilities at Karainagar, Colombo, Welisara, Tangalle and Kalpitiya. The Sri Lankan merchant marine had 99 vessels displacing almost six hundred thousand gross tons.¹³⁵

In the early stages of the war the Sri Lankan Navy had some success interdicting the flow of supplies to the LTTE from their bases in Tamil Nadu in India. The Tamil insurgents were poorly equipped and the faster *Dvoras* inflicted significant losses on the rebels using the seaborne infiltration routes across the Palk Strait.¹³⁶ It was this initial success that caused the LTTE to form the Sea Tigers in 1984.

¹³² Martin N. Murphy, "Maritime Threat: Tactics and Technology of the Sea Tigers," Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, [http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/documentView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/mags/jir/history/jir2006/jir01489.htm@current&pageSelected=allJanes&keyword=sea tigers&backPath=http://jtic.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/search&Prod_Name=&activeNav=http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC](http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/documentView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/mags/jir/history/jir2006/jir01489.htm@current&pageSelected=allJanes&keyword=sea%20tigers&backPath=http://jtic.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/search&Prod_Name=&activeNav=http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC) (accessed 13 July 2010).

¹³³ Bandarage, 195-198.

¹³⁴ Tim Fish, "Sri Lanka Learns to Counter Sea Tigers' Swarm Tactics," *Jane's Navy International*, March 2009, 21.

¹³⁵ Richard Sharpe, ed., *Jane's Fighting Ships, 1988-89* (London: Jane's Publishing Company, 1988), 480-481.

¹³⁶ Martin N. Murphy, "Maritime Threat: Tactics and Technology of the Sea Tigers," Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, <http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/documentView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/mags/jir/history/jir2006/jir01489.htm@current>

The late 1980s were less successful. Indian assistance to the LTTE led to the growth of Sea Tiger capabilities that the SLN found difficult to counter. The Indian Army intervention in Sri Lanka at the end of the decade was not a positive experience for the SLN. The SLN diversion of an aid flotilla from Tamil Nadu only sparked Indian Air Force intervention the next day. Interdiction missions in coordination with the Indian Navy after the LTTE began fighting the IPKF failed to halt the flow of arms to the Tamil insurgents. The Sea Tigers responded with attacks with combat swimmers and fast attack craft against the more conventionally oriented SLN forces.¹³⁷ The LTTE actually gained strength in this period as it received aid from the Indian R & AW, Indian Tamils on the subcontinent, and finally the Sri Lankan government itself when the latter tired of the Indian Peacekeeping Force. The Tamil diaspora was also generous, and when the war escalated following the IPKF's withdrawal in 1990, the Sea Tiger cadres had evolved into a more dynamic and lethal adversary.

From 1990 to the ceasefire agreement in 2002, the war was a series of ups and downs for the Sri Lankan Navy. The Navy occupied a subordinate role in the Army's plans to defeat the LTTE. The SLN conducted patrols to cut the insurgent's maritime lines of communications, ferried soldiers and supplies to isolated army garrisons on the Jaffna peninsula and the eastern coast, provided escorts to friendly shipping transiting to Sri Lankan ports and conducted security patrols around those sea ports.¹³⁸ Several successful amphibious assaults in the northern provinces were conducted with Sri Lankan Army and Air Force units during the early 1990s, resulting in heavy losses by the insurgents.¹³⁹

While these activities assisted the Sri Lankan war effort, seaborne interactions with the Sea Tigers were less successful. The Sea Tigers proved as elusive an enemy at sea as the LTTE ground cadres did on land. The Sea Tigers would typically initiate the engagements, choosing the time and location of the encounter. Operating close to the coast, the Sea Tigers fiberglass fast attack craft and suicide boats were difficult to detect and classify amongst all the normal fishing vessel traffic. The tactical engagements tended to wind up as wild melees as opposed to a coordinated engagement based on coherent doctrine. As most of the actions occurred at night, the SLN was hesitant to call for air support as the close action and similarity of the combatants made blue-on-blue attacks likely.¹⁴⁰ If the Sea Tigers fared poorly in a tactical encounter, they would retire and hide their vessels back in the jungle waiting for the next opportunity to ambush the SLN units. A swarm of Sea Tiger vessels could overwhelm a SLN task force and several *Dvoras* and other fast attack vessels were lost to enemy action. Other SLN vessels were lost to attacks of the combat and suicide swimmers of the Black Sea Tigers, resulting in the overall attrition of one third to one half of all Navy units during this period.¹⁴¹ Navy leadership was also targeted by Black Tiger suicide squads. In November 1992 the head of the Sri Lankan Navy, Vice Admiral W.W. E. C. Fernando was killed in Colombo by a motorcycle riding suicide

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tigers&backPath=http://jtic.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/search&Prod_Name=&activeNav=http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC
(accessed 13 July 2010).

¹³⁷. Connor, 44.

¹³⁸. Fish, 22.

¹³⁹. Connor, 53, 76.

¹⁴⁰. Martin N. Murphy, "Maritime Threat: Tactics and Technology of the Sea Tigers," Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, <http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/documentView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/mags/jir/history/jir2006/jir01489.htm@current>
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tigers&backPath=http://jtic.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/search&Prod_Name=&activeNav=http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC
(accessed 13 July 2010).

¹⁴¹. Hartley, 423.

bomber.¹⁴² Even minor victories could be demoralizing. Sea Tiger cadre members facing internment would commit suicide and achieve martyrdom, often taking Sri Lankan sailors with them.¹⁴³

While both sides had their victories and defeats, the Sea Tigers overall appeared to be more innovative and successful in accomplishing their objectives during this period. Arms and equipment were supplied in sufficient amounts to maintain the LTTE cadres in the field. The Sea Tigers took advantage of the congested areas in the Palk Strait where shallow waters and international boundaries made interdiction of their supply lines difficult. Piracy, human trafficking and drug running were conducted in the area to help subsidize LTTE operations. The Sea Pigeons were able to bring in larger quantities of higher quality military equipment. The Sri Lankan Navy carried out its assigned duties, but does not appear to have had a large operational impact on the course of the conflict.¹⁴⁴

Perhaps most importantly, the Sea Tigers provided the images to reinforce the LTTE propaganda themes required to gain the upper hand in the cognitive domain of the information environment. Internet videos of firefights between Sea Tigers and the Sea Lankan Navy vessels reinforced the mindset that the LTTE was successfully fighting for Tamil self determination. The videos of a sinking SLN *Dvora* patrol craft and a Sri Lankan Air Force helicopter shot down by the insurgents proclaimed to the world that the LTTE was a force to be reckoned with. The Sea Tiger's combination of fear, surprise, ruthless efficiency and an almost fanatical devotion to the leader, Prabhakaran, gave them the edge in achieving a moral ascendancy over the solid, if unspectacular, performance of the Sri Lankan Navy.

Towards the end of the millennium the Sri Lankan Navy began to adapt to the actual character of the conflict. Losses to the fast attack craft inventory were made up in the late 1990s with acquisitions from Israel and the PRC. Better integration with other elements of the armed forces and intelligence organs of the Sri Lankan government were pursued. Yet LTTE improvements kept pace with the SLN changes as the LTTE continually sought to develop a conventional force capable of over matching the Sri Lankan armed forces. The Ceasefire agreement in 2002 tended to limit any additional expansion of the Navy. "During the years 2002 to 2006, the armed forces budget allocations were drastically reduced and there were no acquisitions during that period because of the ceasefire," stated the Sri Lankan Navy's commander, Vice Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda.¹⁴⁵ Sri Lankan naval construction and procurement instead had to shift towards the required forces that could be created and maintained at a sustainable cost. Three classes of fiberglass Inshore Patrol Craft (IPC) of similar size and firepower to the Sea Tigers small craft IPC were developed for operations in the littoral waters off of Sri Lanka. Shipyards with the capacity to construct large numbers of the IPCs were expanded. A research and development organization assisted the modernization of vessels using available technology while minimizing bureaucratic interference.¹⁴⁶

The Sri Lankan Navy created two new units during this period. The Special Boat Squadron (SBS) was an elite force of highly skilled and motivated sailors. These personnel were

¹⁴². "Suicide Attacks by the LTTE," South Asia Intelligence Review, Sri Lanka Datasheets, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/shrilanka/database/data_suicide_killings.htm (accessed 14 July 2010).

¹⁴³. Connor, 40.

¹⁴⁴. Vijayasiri, 57.

¹⁴⁵. Fish, 25.

¹⁴⁶. Ibid., 21-25.

locally trained with instruction assistance provided by the Indian Marine Commandos, US Green Berets and U.S. Navy SEALs. Initial instruction took about one year with over a 50% attrition rate for the recruits. Four to eight man SBS teams were developed to penetrate LTTE territory using the 6.7 meter long fiberglass *Arrow* class IPC. Once in enemy territory, the SBS teams provided reconnaissance and surveillance of LTTE activity. The teams were also trained to conduct long range strikes on high value targets. First set up in 2005, the SBS grew to 600 personnel by 2009.¹⁴⁷

The Rapid Action Boat Squadron (RABS) was similarly developed using other SLN officers and many of the personnel who had attrited from the SBS training pipeline. RABS members operated the other classes of IPC that the Sri Lankan Navy developed, providing capable crews that could exceed Sea Tiger prowess at sea. Officer training was also improved, with all officers attending the Naval and Maritime Academy in Trincomalee before attending advanced schooling in Australia, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, the United Kingdom or the United States.¹⁴⁸



An *Arrow* fast attack craft of the SLN.¹⁴⁹

With improved hardware and manpower available, the Sri Lankan Navy still had to develop a workable doctrine to achieve victory at sea. The SLN developed the “Small Boat Concept” for the Rapid Action Boat Squadrons using the lessons learned in the 1990s from the actions against mixed Sea Tiger conventional and suicide craft flotillas. The Small Boat Concept promulgated the RABS operating in groups of four vessels, several groups combining to form IPC squadrons of 25-30 craft. The IPC squadrons were stationed at strategic bases along the Sri Lankan coast. When the Sri Lankan Navy assessed that a large scale Sea Tiger operation was in the wind, the IPC squadrons would get underway to intercept the insurgent maritime forces. The IPC squadrons would approach the enemy formation in three columns to disguise their numbers

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 23.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 23-24.

¹⁴⁹ Sri Lanka Navy’s RABS/SBS Concept: An Operational and Tactical Edge over Sea Tigers. Sri Lankan Navy. <http://www.navy.lk/index.php?id=1068> (accessed 10 December 2010).

from the enemy. As they approached effective weapons range, the IPCs would form an arrowhead formation to permit the forward fire of each vessel's main battery.¹⁵⁰ With superior numbers and better trained crews available to attack the Sea Tiger's swarms, the SLN could approach engagements with some assurance of victory.

Farther off of the coast, the deeper draft fast attack craft would be tasked to conduct longer endurance patrols, calling for assistance from the IPC squadrons if the Sea Tigers sortied out of their jungle enclaves. In deeper waters the Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPV) would be used to patrol the exclusive economic zone of Sri Lanka and search for larger targets such as the floating sea base provided by the elusive Sea Pigeons. The OPVs were generally older hulls with a cobbled together collection of welded on weapons systems. While not particularly aesthetically appealing warships, the OPVs had the range and firepower to prevail against any Sea Pigeon merchant ship.¹⁵¹ Security of maritime bases was also improved, though the SLN did not appear interested in creating a mine warfare capability despite the Sea Tiger's demonstrated facility in this warfare area. While the Sri Lankan Navy increased in capability, Sri Lankan commanders still had to demonstrate that they could effectively employ these forces.

During the period of the ceasefire agreement, the Sri Lankan government began to take more effective actions to break the support chain from the Tamil diaspora to the LTTE cadres. Colombo exploited the American designation of the Tamil Tigers as a terrorist group as well as the worldwide antipathy for terrorist activities following the 9/11 attacks.¹⁵² Sri Lanka lobbied hard to have the LTTE finances and armament purchasing curtailed in North America and Europe, although LTTE sympathizers worked to mitigate these attempts.¹⁵³ LTTE financial assets in Britain were frozen in 2001, but the Sri Lankan government failed to maintain the initiative against the financial buttresses of LTTE military power throughout the West.¹⁵⁴ The Sri Lankan government had greater success in reaching out to regional neighbors, particularly the PRC. The PRC became Sri Lanka's primary aid donor, particularly after the United States stopped all direct military aid in 2007 due to the poor human rights record of the Sri Lankan military. Beijing's calculations were less disconcerted by such concerns, and the PRC provided \$1 billion of aid including sophisticated weapons and advanced combat aircraft. The PRC also encouraged Pakistan to provide training and arms to Colombo and provided cover for its new found ally in the forums of the United Nations.¹⁵⁵ Sri Lanka expanded intelligence links with its neighbors, including India, who had presumably lost interest with Prabhakaran's delusions of Tamil statehood by this time.¹⁵⁶

Sri Lankan officials also attempted to mitigate the effectiveness of LTTE propaganda streams by stopping their transmission as well as providing their own strategic communication for international consumption. With its own less than stellar record of human rights protection, the Sri Lankan government had difficulty matching the LTTE's siren cries. Instead, Sri Lanka took the offensive by showcasing the LTTE as just another of the myriad terrorist organizations

¹⁵⁰. Fish, 22-23.

¹⁵¹. Ibid., 22-24.

¹⁵². Cecile Vande Voorde, "Sri Lankan Terrorism: Assessing and Responding to the Threat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)," *Police Practice and Research*, 6, no. 2 (May 2005), 194-195.

¹⁵³. Bandarage, 197-198.

¹⁵⁴. Ibid., 175.

¹⁵⁵. Popham.

¹⁵⁶. R. S. Vasan, "Sea Control off Sri Lanka," *Observer Research Foundation Discourse, The Way Ahead in Sri Lanka*, 1, no. 2 (November 2006): 7-8.

that needed to be eliminated. Sri Lankan victories were highlighted and the internet was populated with videos of successful operations against the Sea Tiger squadrons. Sri Lankan information operations did not attain the penetration that the LTTE organs achieved, but they significantly narrowed the gap and wrested away the LTTE's previous stranglehold on the media.

When hostilities between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government began to increase in 2005, the Sri Lankan Navy was prepared to provide a greater contribution to the national effort to destroy Prabhakaran's forces. The assassination of Sri Lankan foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar by a sniper in August 2005 may not have been the work of the LTTE, but Kadirgamar's work in the international community describing the LTTE as a terrorist organization certainly had aroused Prabhakaran's ire. The killing also helped to galvanize Sri Lankan President Rajapaksa into authorizing further military operations to crush the LTTE. Rajapaksa's naming of his brother, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, a retired Sri Lankan Army officer, as Minister of Defense signaled the new tenor of the administration.¹⁵⁷ Certainly the Norwegian diplomatic efforts had not been seen as impartial in Colombo. Norwegians had leaked information to the LTTE regarding Sri Lankan Navy attempts to seize a Sea Pigeon ship, allowing the vessel to escape. Norwegian officials had lobbied to provide the LTTE with the same rights under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Finally, the Norwegian ambassador was accused of providing Tiger cadres with advanced radio equipment that could be used to track LTTE opponents for later assassination.¹⁵⁸

The LTTE responded to the Sri Lankan government's hardening policies with its standard menu of low level attacks on police and army checkpoints, mining of roads, and targeted suicide bombing attacks against military and political leadership. Large scale fighting was initially averted though the frequency of seaborne engagements increased. In March 2006 a SLN patrol vessel was destroyed after the trawler it had stopped to search for contraband was detonated alongside, killing all of the trawler's crew as well as eight SLN sailors. The Sea Tigers attacked a troop transport on its way to the Jaffna peninsula in May, killing 17 sailors.¹⁵⁹ In July 2006, LTTE cadre members seized the sluice gates of the Mavil Aru reservoir located near Trincomalee. This water supply provided irrigation water for 15,000 villages in territory held by the Sri Lankan government. Talks to open up the water supply failed and the Sri Lankan Air Force commenced bombing LTTE positions around Trincomalee in response.¹⁶⁰ Further pleas for negotiations from European Union truce monitors were rebuffed by the LTTE as Prabhakaran had become irritated with the monitors after the EU had labeled the LTTE as a terrorist group in May.¹⁶¹ The war was back on.

The Sri Lankan armed forces entered this phase of the conflict with clear goals and objectives. President Rajapaksa had been elected on a campaign platform to annihilate the LTTE. He was unwavering on the necessity to crush the LTTE cadres since previous bouts of fighting and negotiation had failed to resolve the issues between the insurgents and the government. The President clearly articulated to the Army Commander that he was to "eliminate

¹⁵⁷. Hartley, 432.

¹⁵⁸. Bandarage, 193.

¹⁵⁹. Hartley, 437.

¹⁶⁰. Ibid., 432.

¹⁶¹. Ibid., 437.

the LTTE.”¹⁶² With this intent, commander of the Sri Lankan Army, General Sarath Fonseka, was directed to “win back the LTTE held areas, eliminate the top LTTE leadership and give the Tamils a political solution.”¹⁶³ The Sri Lankan Navy’s role in this phase of the war was to sever the sea lines of communications of the LTTE, protect the Sri Lankan SLOCs between Trincomalee and Jaffna, and destroy the Sea Tigers as a viable force. All Sri Lankan armed forces would coordinate their efforts to achieve these tasks. Naval personnel would also be used to garrison liberated territory, allowing Army units to maintain the offensive against the LTTE.¹⁶⁴

Initial engagements demonstrated that the war had entered a more conventional phase. Previously the Tamil Tigers had seamlessly shifted back and forth across the spectrum of conflict depending upon how well the war was progressing. If conventional warfare was going poorly, suicide attacks and guerilla warfare became the primary mode of resistance. If the Sri Lankan forces exhibited weakness, the Tiger cadres would mass for more conventional attacks. The ceasefire period apparently dulled this capacity for dynamic response. The LTTE had enjoyed its status as a quasi-state in northern and eastern Sri Lanka and had shifted many of its forces to a more conventional capability and mindset. The loss of many veteran cadre members with experience in guerilla operations may also have affected the LTTE’s flexibility. This emphasis on fighting and winning conventional style engagements required greater logistic support for ammunition and other war material, logistic support that could only be provided if the insurgent sea lines of communication were secure.¹⁶⁵ When the Sri Lankan Army launched a major operation around Trincomalee to clear the insurgents in the eastern province, the LTTE attempted to hold their territory. Static defenses were pounded with the Sri Lankan Army’s new weaponry, particularly rocket launchers from Pakistan, causing heavy LTTE casualties. Deep penetration raids by Sri Lankan SOF teams and harassment by Colonel Karuna’s Tamil irregulars placed additional strains on the insurgents.¹⁶⁶ Combined with costly counterattacks against the Sri Lankan Army’s offensive, the LTTE rapidly found itself on the wrong end of an attritional struggle.

Combined operations between the Sri Lankan forces immediately generated a higher than expected loss rate of the Sea Tiger’s fast attack craft. A naval engagement off of the northern Jaffna peninsula destroyed 12 vessels, while the Sri Lankan Air Force pounded suspected Sea Tiger naval construction yards. On the minus side for the SLN, in October, 2007, a suicide truck bomber attacked an assembly of off-watch naval personnel, killing 102 in the most deadly attack of the war. These sailors had been used as garrison forces in areas that the Sri Lankan army had liberated. Later in the month another attack by the Sea Tigers with Black Sea Tiger support

¹⁶². V. K. Shashikumar, “Lessons from the War in Sri Lanka,” Indian Defense Review on the net, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/2009/10/lessons-from-the-war-in-sri-lanka.html> (accessed 4 February 2010).

¹⁶³. Ibid.

¹⁶⁴. Sergei DeSilva, “Good Education – Sri Lankan Military Learns Insurgency Lessons,” Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Center, Intelligence Review, http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/documentView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/mags/jir/history/jir2009/jir10774.htm@current&pageSelected=allJanes&keyword=Sri Lankan Military Learns Insurgency Lessons&backPath=http://jtic.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC/search&Prod_Name=&activeNav=http://www8.janes.com/JDIC/JTIC (accessed 1 July 2010).

¹⁶⁵. Ibid.

¹⁶⁶. Ibid.

damaged two SLN craft in the south at Galle. The Black Sea Tigers expended two suicide craft and 15 cadre members for the loss of one SLN sailor.¹⁶⁷

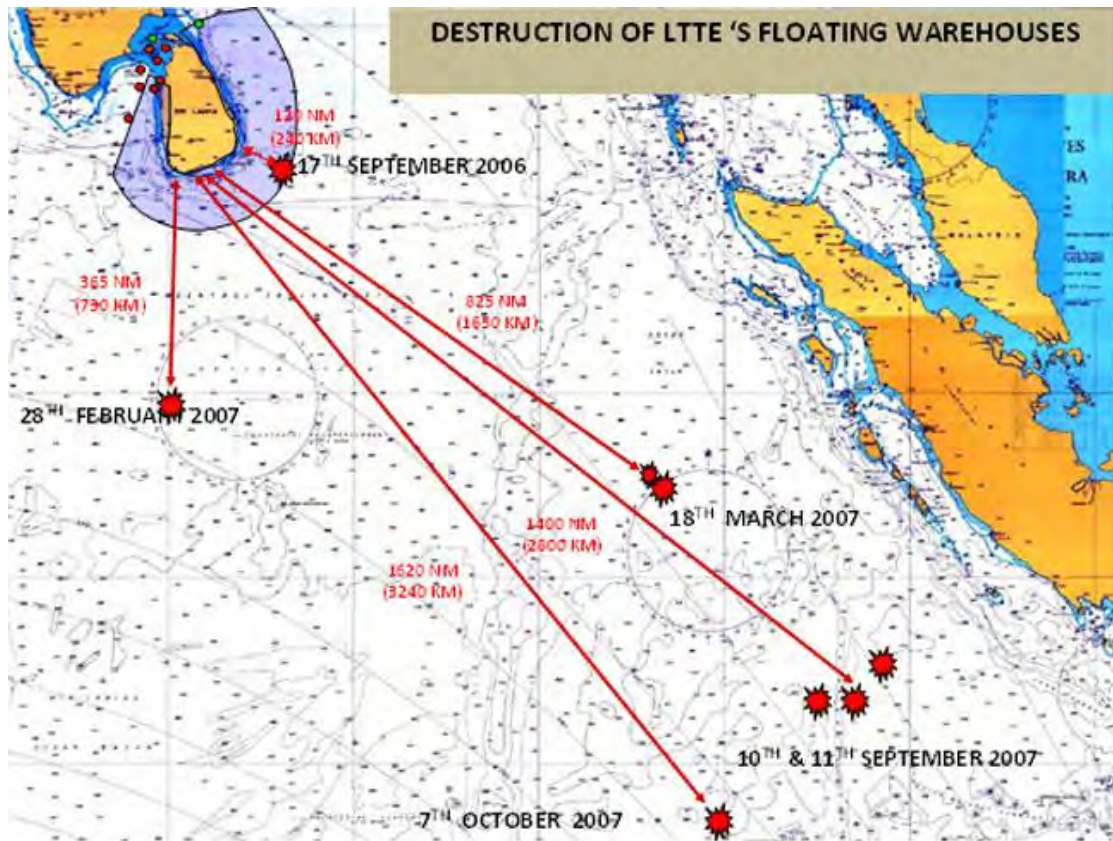
While support of the ground operations was important, the SLN scored its greatest successes in late 2006 and 2007 with the destruction of the LTTE's fleet of floating warehouses. For decades the Sea Tigers had operated this sea base as a means to resupply LTTE forces with the required arms and ammunition. The SLN had not been able to interdict these ships as the Sea Pigeons had typically stayed out of range of the Sri Lankan Navy's vessels, only coming close to the island to deliver critical war supplies when the Sea Tigers could provide adequate protection. In 2006 and 2007, the SLN conducted numerous long range attacks on these vessels using the Offshore Patrol Vessels and a collection of civilian craft used to refuel the OPVs.¹⁶⁸ Indian intelligence proved essential to establish the Sea Pigeon operating patterns.¹⁶⁹ The first Sea Pigeon vessel was located and sunk on 17 September 2006 approximately 120 nautical miles southwest of Sri Lanka. As the Sea Tigers moved these vessels further away from the island, the SLN followed. Another LTTE supply ship was sunk in February 2007 and two more in March, at distances of almost nine hundred nautical miles. In the fall the SLN scored again. A SLN task force steamed over fourteen hundred nautical miles from Sri Lanka to attack a LTTE Sea Pigeon convoy located off the coast of Indonesia near the Cocoa Islands. Three Sea Pigeons were sunk, and the survivor hunted down and dispatched three weeks later. "We went near to Australian waters and whacked the last four vessels," recounted VADM Karannagoda. Since the LTTE vessels ran without colors or other identification, the SLN could assert that their ships were acting under self defense when they sank the insurgent vessels, having come under fire from the insurgent ships after hailing them.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷. Hartley, 437.

¹⁶⁸. Fish, 24.

¹⁶⁹. Shashikumar. Others suggest that American satellite intelligence was instrumental in locating the stealthy Sea Pigeons. See Jon Lee Anderson, "Death of a Tiger," *The New Yorker*, 17 January 2011, 48.

¹⁷⁰. Fish, 24.



The Sri Lankan Navy located and destroyed eight LTTE Sea Pigeon vessels during 2007 at distances of over 1600 NM from Sri Lanka.¹⁷¹

The destruction of the Sea Pigeons was a serious blow to the LTTE. VADM Karannagoda claimed that the LTTE “totally lost their supplies and that turned the war. It was one of the major turning points of the war that has been going on for the last thirty years.”¹⁷² While the LTTE had numerous caches of arms and ammunition on Sri Lanka, it was now restricted in its ability to replenish expended stocks, particularly such items such as artillery shells and mortar rounds. As the war progressed, this caused an additional loss of LTTE combat power even as the number of cadre members were being attrited in combat.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹. Destruction of LTTE's Floating Warehouses. Sri Lanka Ministry of Defence. http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20100806_12 (accessed 10 December 2010).

¹⁷². Fish, 24.

¹⁷³. DeSilva



The Sea Pigeon *Kyoi* was destroyed by the Sri Lankan Navy on 28 February 2007.¹⁷⁴

Closer to home, Sri Lankan attacks caused Sea Tiger losses to rise even as the quantity and quality of the SLN forces increased. The numerous craft operated by the SBS and RABS using the Small Boat Concept slowly but surely destroyed the Sea Tigers. Tactical actions were initially fairly frequent as the Sea Tigers attempted to escort resupply trawlers crossing the Palk Strait or interdict the Sri Lankan maritime supply lines to Jaffna. The SLN had 21 engagements with the Sea Tigers in 2006, with up to 30 craft on each side exchanging fire for over 14 hours on occasion. This number decreased to 11 in 2007 and then only four in 2008.¹⁷⁵ The losses in any of these individual engagements were not catastrophic to either of the adversaries, but the cumulative effect shattered the Sea Tigers. The Sri Lankan Navy could afford the losses; the Sea Tigers could not. Attacks by the Sri Lankan Air Force continued to cause losses to the shore infrastructure of the Sea Tigers as did the Sri Lankan Army advance into LTTE coastal territory. The capture of important Sea Tiger bases in the north greatly reduced the LTTE's ability to recoup previous losses and denied the insurgents easy access to the sea.¹⁷⁶

Sea Tiger counterattacks tended to be ineffective and costly. Twelve Sea Tiger boats were sunk off Jaffna by the SLN in September 2006 with the loss of 80 insurgents.¹⁷⁷ A Sea Tiger raid at Delft Island in May 2007, an important post near Jaffna harbor, was repulsed by the combined forces of the Sri Lankan Air Force and Navy, with little to show for the losses.¹⁷⁸ The

¹⁷⁴. Sri Lanka Navy destroys the 10th LTTE arms ship 1700 km off Dondra. Sri Lankan Navy. <http://www.navy.lk/index.php?id=482> (accessed 14 December 2010).

¹⁷⁵. Fish, 24.

¹⁷⁶. Hartley, 433.

¹⁷⁷. Ibid., 437.

¹⁷⁸. Ibid., 438.

Sea Tigers shifted to mine warfare to strike at the SLN, sinking a fast attack craft and an auxiliary ship.¹⁷⁹ Suicide attacks on merchant shipping by the Black Sea Tigers also decreased in effectiveness while the attacks by the now mission capable Air Tigers, who bombed the SLN headquarters in Trincomalee, were at most a nuisance.¹⁸⁰ As the manpower of the LTTE was further reduced, Sea Tiger cadres were often called upon to defend important posts in LTTE territory against the advancing Sri Lankan Army. The LTTE's static defense of territory allowed the Sri Lankan Army to mass firepower and inflict large casualties on the insurgent defenders. New fighters could be forcibly impressed from the Tamil population, but the loss of veteran leaders markedly decreased the insurgent combat power. With the offensive capabilities of the Sea Tigers significantly reduced, the SLN could expend more time and energy assisting the Sri Lankan Army's offensives as well as provide humanitarian assistance to areas that had been liberated. Medical teams from the SLN provided assistance to the beleaguered civilians that emerged following the most recent bout of fighting.¹⁸¹

The expanding Sri Lankan successes degraded the LTTE's propaganda efforts. Already damaged by the terrorist branding, the LTTE and Tamil diaspora found the Sri Lankan operations in the information environment sufficient to negate much of their earlier advantages. Sri Lanka was able to present images of success on the battlefield, as well as attempts to assist the local population, that muted the persistent LTTE claims of Sri Lankan human rights violations. The Sri Lanka government additionally attempted to control the information environment by preventing external media sources from providing independent reports on the status of the conflict. Forced to choose between the narratives of the terrorist LTTE official website and Sri Lankan government controlled media organs, the international community was no longer willing to accede the moral high ground to the Tigers. Controlling the flow of information also blunted any calls by the international community to force a cease fire on the combatants based on humanitarian concerns from increased civilian casualties. The Sri Lankan government was highly committed to the destruction of the LTTE through military means. Previous attempts at negotiations had always broken down due to LTTE stubbornness or perfidy. Limiting the free flow of information about the ebb and flow of the war allowed the Sri Lankan forces to maintain their operational tempo unhindered by an unexpected ceasefire as opposed to a planned operational pause. The Rajapaksa administration resolved to withstand any external pressure to accept anything other than total victory.¹⁸²

As the Sea Tigers were gradually ground down to irrelevance, the LTTE's fortunes also faded. Despite being unable to hold back the Sri Lankan Army's advances into the LTTE stronghold in the Northern provinces, Prabhakaran was unwilling to revert back to the guerilla tactics that had been previously successful. This may have been partly due to the success of the Sri Lankan Army's SOF deep penetration raids as well as the Navy's SBS operations. Many LTTE cadre members were required to provide rear echelon security against the Sri Lankan SOF infiltration, removing their presence from the front lines. Cadre leaders found fewer safe places to hide and plan new courses of action to regain the initiative. Colonel Karuna's defectors also placed pressure on the depleted Tiger cadres by assisting the reformed Sri Lankan Police's paramilitary forces, the Special Task Force, in rooting out hardened LTTE members from the

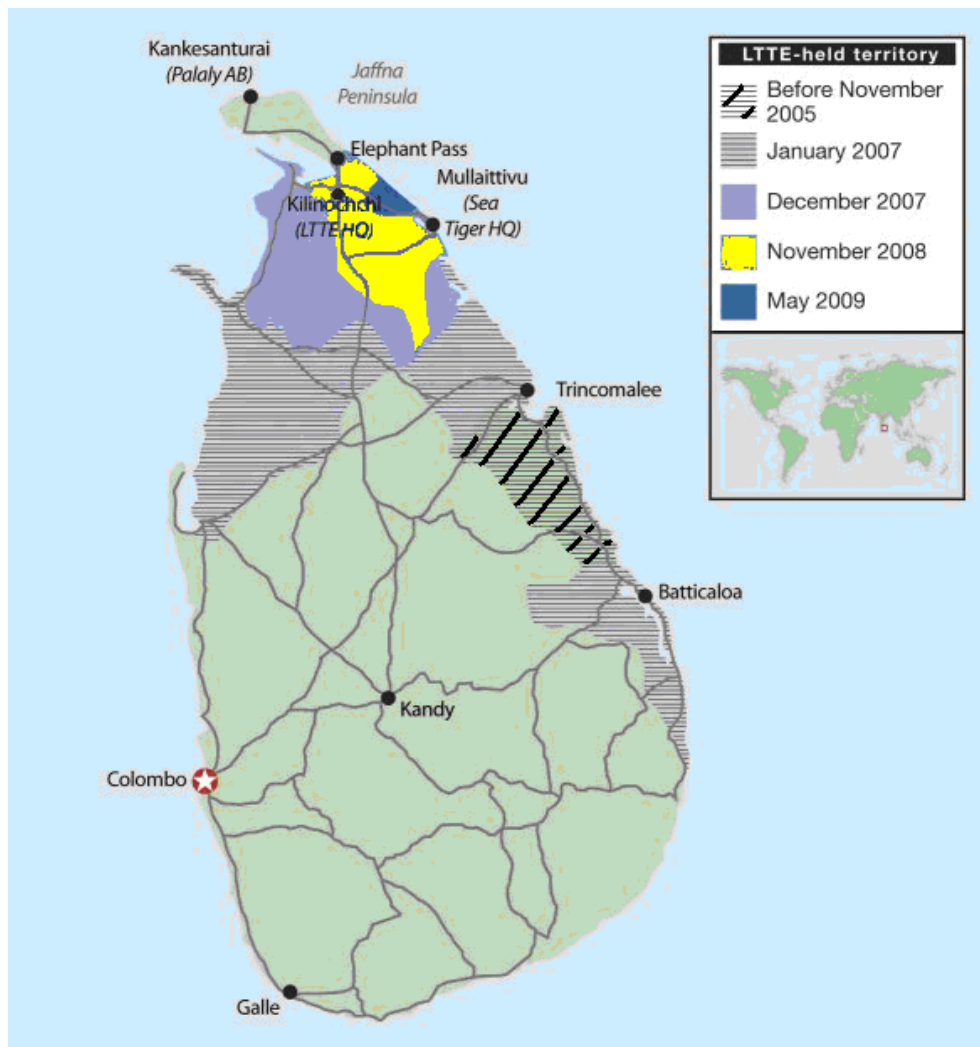
¹⁷⁹. Fish, 25.

¹⁸⁰. Hartley, 438.

¹⁸¹. "Navy special medical team conducts a special medical clinic for Toppur Villages in the Eastern province," Sri Lanka Navy, <http://www.navy.lk/index.php?id=1081> (accessed 22 July 2010).

¹⁸². Shashikumar.

population.¹⁸³ LTTE suicide bombings targeted at senior Sri Lankan officials and other soft targets continued, but the Sri Lankan security efforts were more successful at deflecting some of these attacks, and the political will of the government in Colombo was hardened to accept the losses in the pursuit of military victory.¹⁸⁴



The Sri Lankan offensives from 2006 to 2009 slowly but surely liberated territory held by the LTTE.¹⁸⁵

With the degradation of LTTE naval power, the SLN was able to extend its zone of control even as the Sri Lankan Army was tightening the noose on the contracting LTTE territory. Additional small boats and fast attack craft provided a layered defense against Sea Tiger infiltration further reducing the flow of now life sustaining supplies to the LTTE forces. The destruction of Sea Tiger craft and personnel, the loss of the warehouse ships for supplies, the loss

¹⁸³. DeSilva.

¹⁸⁴. "Suicide Attacks by the LTTE," South Asia Intelligence Review, Sri Lanka Datasheets, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/shrilanka/database/data_suicide_killings.htm (accessed 14 July 2010).

¹⁸⁵. DeSilva.

of naval construction facilities, and the capture of vital sea ports all acted in concert to reduce the Sea Tiger's ability to conduct operations and allowed the SLN to achieve sea control around the remaining LTTE controlled areas. The Sri Lankan Army's deliberate offensive into the northeastern portion of the island, the LTTE's base territory, could not be blunted by the remaining conventional forces available to Prabhakaran and his lieutenants. The liberation of this area opened up the Sri Lankan ground lines of communications to the Jaffna Peninsula which permitted the SLN to shift resources in support of subsequent offensive operations, as fewer ships and supplies had to be sent by sea. By late 2008 the LTTE had been pushed into a large pocket in the northeastern portion of the island. While the Sri Lankan Army casualties had been heavy (5300 killed and 28,000 wounded), the losses were acceptable to the government and the Sri Lankan population. The Sri Lankans claimed to have killed 22,000 Tamil Tigers in the last portion of the war, an attrition rate that the LTTE could not withstand even with forced conscription. LTTE counterattacks from their remaining stronghold were unsuccessful and costly, and even the use of tear gas failed to impede the inexorable Sri Lankan advance.¹⁸⁶

By early 2009, the LTTE remnants were reduced to occupying the "Vanni Pocket" around the town of Puthulkidirippu. As its frontline forces dwindled, the LTTE brought increased numbers of long suffering civilians with its retreating forces to act as human shields. The LTTE attempted to use the potential of increased civilian casualties in the endgame of the war to spark international concern and pressure the Sri Lankan government to accept a new truce. By now however there were few nations interested in assisting the LTTE, indirectly or otherwise.¹⁸⁷ The Sri Lankan government was also hardened against any foreign interference, seeing it as detrimental to the successful conclusion of the war when the LTTE was on the ropes.¹⁸⁸ In February, the last Sea Tiger naval base was captured by the Sri Lankan Army. The besieging forces maintained pressure on the frontline LTTE forces while Sri Lankan SOF teams tried to infiltrate LTTE lines and kill the remaining senior members of the Tiger's command structure.¹⁸⁹ The SLN patrolled the littoral areas seaward of the pocket to prevent any LTTE leadership from escaping the island to continue the conflict. The Deputy Leader of the Sea Tigers was killed in early May by Sri Lankan forces (the LTTE claimed he was killed by artillery fire). The final stand of the LTTE at the Nanthikandal lagoon area on the northeastern coast of Sri Lanka on 17 May 2009 was an appropriate end for the insurgent group. Within sight of the ocean that had provided sustenance for the movement, Velupillai Prabhakaran was killed along with the shattered remains of the organization that had fought for Tamil independence for almost 30 years. Three days later, the Sri Lankan government declared the conflict against the LTTE to be formally ended.¹⁹⁰ Some 80,000 to 100,000 people had died during the course of the conflict.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Shashikumar.

¹⁸⁹ DeSilva.

¹⁹⁰ Hartley, 439-440.

¹⁹¹ "Up to 100,000 killed in Sri Lanka's civil war: UN," ABC News, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/05/20/2576543.htm> (accessed 26 July 2010).

Lessons For Future Insurgents And Counterinsurgent Maritime Forces

Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake.

- Napoleon Bonaparte, French general & politician (1769 - 1821)

While it is too early to tell if postwar Sri Lankan movements to resolve the issues that led to the conflict are holding, the decisive military defeat of the LTTE appears to have at least dampened any enthusiasm for the Tamils, or any other element of Sri Lankan society, to oppose the government by violent means. Various actors and agencies are vying for political dominance in Colombo, hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people are seeking new homes, a devastated countryside requires rebuilding, and reconciliation with the Tamil population is still being attended to.¹⁹² No simple and easy solutions will magically heal the wounds of virulent internal conflict following twenty seven years of warfare, but at least for now, the LTTE appears to be a spent force.¹⁹³

The Sri Lankan Civil War is of interest to the military professional for a number of reasons. To begin with, the Sri Lankan Civil War was a conflict where the government not only won, but won decisively. Often one hears that in such a struggle the insurgents merely have to endure to eventually be victorious in some political resolution of the war. The Tamil insurgents failed to meet even this minimum criterion of success. While the conflict was a protracted one, the war was successfully concluded along the lines that the Sri Lankan government desired. A military solution proved both necessary and sufficient.

From the Sri Lankan point of view, the lessons learned from this conflict appear manifest. The „Rajapaksa“ model for fighting the Tamil insurgency evolved over the course of several years, but it emphasized the use of the military element of national power to crush the LTTE. President Rajapaksa was willing and able to absorb all the domestic and international political criticism while providing the Sri Lankan armed forces the necessary space and resources to seek and achieve victory. The Sri Lankan Army and Navy were substantially increased to provide the larger forces necessary to conduct offensive operations and hold the ground that had been gained, increases that required the support of the population. The President, and his brother as Defense Secretary, provided the top cover while General Fonseka directed the Sri Lankan Army. The political leadership of the government took considerable criticism during the final segment of the war due to military setbacks, inadvertent civilian casualties, harsh anti-terrorism measures taken to stop suicide bombers, and a categorical opposition to any negotiations with the LTTE. Regardless of the criticism, warranted or not, the Rajapaksa brothers remained resolute. Despite international pleas for negotiations with the LTTE to minimize civilian casualties, the Sri Lankan

¹⁹². General Fonseka, the Sri Lankan Army general and architect of the final offensive ran unsuccessfully against President Rajapaksa in the January 2010 presidential election and was later tried, convicted and imprisoned for corrupt military deals. See Amal Jayasinghe, “Sri Lanka jails ex-army chief Fonseka,” AFP, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iNE2z6YPPccyYObraBkLB7jEVadg> (accessed 02 April 2011).

¹⁹³. *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Peace*, Crisis Group Asia Briefing no. 99 (Brussels, Belgium: International Crisis Group, 11 January 2010): 1-2

government refused to bend. “We knew that the moment the military is close to operational successes, there will be loud screams for the resumption of the political process of peace negotiations. But there will be no negotiations,” the President stated in a post war interview.¹⁹⁴ In Rajapaksa’s mind the international community had obstructed the Sri Lankan fight against the LTTE. The LTTE used negotiations merely as a ploy to regroup when they were losing the war, using the time to recover and then strike again. Proposed ceasefire periods were also rejected because of their previous abuse by the LTTE.¹⁹⁵ This uncompromising approach prevented the LTTE from exploiting internal government dissension and hesitation, seams that had proven profitable to exploit in the past.

Essential to the deflection of any external interference was the control of the information environment of the conflict. The Colombo government regulated the media to the extent that the official Sri Lankan version of events was the only one available to be reported. Despite the relatively free press in the country, independent news sources were prevented from covering events from the front lines. External observers were then forced to pick and choose between the Sri Lankan government’s official version of the fighting and the LTTE’s official internet press organ. With an increased presence in the information domain and the stigma attached to the LTTE following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Sri Lankan government was able to mitigate many of the previous advantages that the insurgent’s had held.¹⁹⁶

The military team selected by the government was composed of professionals committed to ending the war using military means. General Fonseka was called out of retirement and was provided a free hand to direct operations while the civilian political leadership provided support despite the high cost in lives, both military and civilian, that the final offensives generated. The recalled general pushed out more senior ossified leaders and selected younger commanders who had the energy and initiative to conduct Fonseka’s proscribed course of action. Fonseka carefully translated the political goals into military objectives that the Sri Lankan armed forces could achieve. This was not a war of sweeping mechanized thrusts that populate popular television channels. Instead it was a methodical offensive that if tactically uninspiring was striking in its design and results. The Sri Lankan military took significant casualties in these operations, but unlike previous phases of the war, the operations were properly sequenced and synchronized to inflict losses on the LTTE cadres while capturing important territorial objectives. Despite these losses, morale in the Sri Lankan Army remained high as the personnel could see that progress was being made and that the political leadership was committed to their success.¹⁹⁷

Finally, the Rajapaksa administration took advantage of the international environment. The Indian government was wooed to provide intelligence on the LTTE maritime supply efforts, information that was vital in the destruction of the Sea Tigers and the isolation of the Tamil insurgency. Gaining intelligence on the location of the Sea Pigeon ships, the Sri Lankan Navy was able to execute a series of attacks that cut the sea lines of communications of the LTTE. Stripped of their largest logistics streams, the LTTE found it more difficult to respond to the heavy blows that the Sri Lankan Army was delivering in LTTE controlled territory. The leader of the Sri Lankan Navy, Vice Admiral Karanagoda opined that this interdiction was decisive. “It

¹⁹⁴. Shashikumar.

¹⁹⁵. Ibid.

¹⁹⁶. Ibid.

¹⁹⁷. Ibid.

was one of the major turning points in the last 30 years of conflict. That was the main reason the LTTE are losing the battle, we did not allow a single supply of replenishment ship to come into (Sri Lankan) waters over the last two and a half years since 2006.”¹⁹⁸

The proclaimed Rajapaksa model seems less convincing with regards to how the dynamic international environment was exploited. After the September 2001 attacks on the United States, the terrorist actions of the LTTE were viewed less as attacks of an aggrieved group fighting for national identity. The Tamil diaspora support came under greater scrutiny as western nations clamped down on the extracurricular financial activities of many groups linked to terrorism. American focus in the Middle East and Chinese interest in the Indian Ocean gave the Sri Lankan government the necessary support of a rising power and the acquiescence of a declining one. Indian vexation at Prabhakaran following the assassination of Ghandi grew to outright support of Colombo despite deep seated fears of both governments. The defection of Colonel Karuna was also crucial in breaking away an important component of LTTE military force and providing vital intelligence for the Sri Lankan forces to exploit. Large scale natural disasters are rarely available to be exploited by the counterinsurgent forces, and certainly not on command. None of these concurrent circumstances or the use of other aspects of national power seem considered in the Sri Lankan counterinsurgency model.

The primacy of the military in this counterinsurgency model makes it somewhat ill fitted for application in other conflicts. If merely allowing the military to sally forth to victory by providing the essential arms, equipment and political top cover was all that was required to achieve success, then insurgency would be seen as a much less viable method to aspiring rebels. While the focus and commitment of the Sri Lankan government prior to 2004 on pursuing the conflict varied, the Sri Lankan military forces still took over twenty years to find the measure of their opponents. Despite Sri Lankan advantages in firepower and organization, the LTTE was able to seize the initiative and inflict painful defeats on the government forces even as the Tamil insurgents were able to occupy the political and moral high ground. The LTTE under its leader Prabhakaran was consistently able to define the character of the struggle, shifting back and forth across the spectrum of conflict with great skill and dexterity. Suicide bombers, swarming attack craft, jungle ambushes and large scale amphibious assaults were all elements in the LTTE tactical tool box. When tactical defeats occurred, branch plans could be executed to regain the initiative at the strategic level, providing the time for the cadres to regroup and resupply for the next round of fighting. These operational pauses were consistently misinterpreted by the Sri Lankan military and government that saw the insurgents as somewhat less than totally committed to the cause of Tamil independence. Concurrently the LTTE maintained its grip on the Tamil population through intimidation, assassination and propaganda while Sri Lankan human rights abuses made the LTTE even more devoted to victory. In this manner, Prabhakaran frustrated numerous Sri Lankan government efforts to destroy, suppress or marginalize the insurgent forces. It seems overly simple to suggest that an earlier application of unconstrained firepower would have been sufficient to crush the insurgents.

The maritime component of this conflict is of particular interest as it demonstrates how maritime forces could support the operations of both insurgent and counterinsurgent forces. The development of the Sri Lankan Navy seems particularly notable in this respect. The SLN started the conflict as a minor force capable of some coast guard functions and required almost two

¹⁹⁸. Ibid.

decades to develop into a force that could successfully conduct war at sea. In the early years the Sea Tigers consistently outperformed the SLN in the Sri Lankan littoral environment. The insurgent maritime force was more tactically and technically innovative, adapted more rapidly to the changing character of the war, and worked seamlessly with other LTTE military and political organizations. The SLN was not able to sufficiently interdict the insurgent logistics flow to prevent the LTTE from expanding its numbers and capabilities, nor did it create adequate forces to battle the Sea Tiger forces at sea. The Black Sea Tigers appeared to confuse the SLN far longer than they should have.

While it took a long time for the SLN to determine the character of the maritime conflict, the organization eventually adapted to fight the war they were in and not the one they may have wanted to fight. When the Sea Tiger swarms proved difficult to deal with, the SLN built and manned larger numbers of more capable craft that eventually wore down the enemy. Modified Offshore Patrol Vessels were used to seek out and sink the LTTE's sea base. Innovation with the Small Boat and Rapid Action Boat Squadrons allowed the SLN to "out guerilla" the guerilla maritime forces, providing additional pressure on the LTTE organization.

Perhaps more importantly than any other internal improvement, the SLN was finally used in a coordinated, though not joint, manner with other military forces. Defeating the Sea Tigers at sea was ably assisted by the Sri Lankan Army and Air Forces through the destruction or capture of Sea Tiger bases and shore facilities. The final Sri Lankan ground offensives often drew the Sea Tiger cadres into large scale attritional ground combat. Insurgent sailors killed in these engagements were just as dead as any killed in a sinking fast attack craft. The fearless veteran Sea Tiger crews could not be replaced by the conscription of youthful Tamils. Intelligence gained from other sources permitted the SLN to locate and destroy the Sea Tiger's sea base, which demonstrably assisted the war effort. These indirect attacks on the Sea Tiger personnel and infrastructure were effective in destroying the critical capabilities and requirements of the maritime insurgent force. The destruction of the Sea Pigeons showed that the SLN could conduct operations at a distance from the littoral. Subsequent efforts to isolate the LTTE on Sri Lanka were more successful than previous ones and additional arms and ammunition were prevented from replenishing the magazines of the LTTE. With its sea lines of communications interdicted, the logistic requirements of the insurgent forces trapped in a conventional conflict could not be met, allowing the Sri Lankan forces to effectively attack and destroy the main LTTE ground forces. None of the LTTE leaders escaped from the final destruction of the insurgents. The success at sea in the last phase of the war also undercut LTTE information operation efforts by the Sri Lankan Navy's showcasing the destruction of the Sea Tiger forces and the growing capability of Sri Lankan forces to win in any environment.

This learning process was not cheap, easy or short. The SLN eventually attained a strength of 48,000 men (of which over a third, known as Naval Patrolmen, were used as garrison forces) in territory the army had liberated from the LTTE) to expel the Sea Tigers from the Sri Lankan littoral areas. The SLN lost over a thousand sailors killed during the course of the conflict.¹⁹⁹ Given twenty years, a large force structure and sufficient political backing, the SLN successfully adapted to the problem and was victorious. It learned that sea control is not a function of large gray hulls with billion dollar sensor suites, but the intelligent application of the

¹⁹⁹. Fallen Comrades. Sri Lankan Navy. <http://www.navy.lk/index.php?id=45> (accessed 9 December 2010).

available forces to achieve attainable objectives. In this manner, the SLN's performance was commendable and warrants further study.

The Sea Tigers will probably receive the greater interest, at least in the near future, in how an insurgent group can profit from the use of maritime forces. Yet this may be difficult to examine, if only due to the death of most of the senior LTTE and Sea Tiger leadership. The ruthlessness and ferociousness of the insurgents make publication of wartime memoirs a daunting proposition for any survivor; it remains doubtful if any „lost cause“ narrative of the rebellion by the surviving LTTE cadre members will be considered honorable in Sri Lanka or anywhere else.

Yet to the military professional, the accomplishments of the Sea Tigers were still impressive. Starting out with a few stray fishing craft and small arms, they successfully challenged the naval forces of a minor power for over twenty years. They created out of sheer will and fiberglass a force that could operate across the spectrum of conflict. The Sea Tigers demonstrated a mastery of all available weaponry such as combat divers, homemade sea mines, suicide boats and fast attack vessels. They built an infrastructure that could train cadre members for both maritime and ground combat duties. They operated well with other LTTE combat elements, providing amphibious assault and raiding capabilities or ground force elements depending on the requirements of the current operation and how well the war was progressing. The Sea Tigers moved across this range of military operations using piracy, human trafficking, and drug running to help support the cause, conducting attacks on the Sri Lankan maritime trade and economic infrastructure to hurt the adversary's war effort, and performing suicide boat attacks to drive home the point that the cadres were fearless in the pursuit of Tamil independence.

Perhaps most importantly, the Sea Tigers ensured the LTTE's sea lines of communications remained viable. Prabhakaran's visions drove the LTTE to procure greater amounts of advanced weapons, equipment and ammunition to conduct the insurgency, material that could only be procured through external sources. This modern day „Tokyo Express“ ensured that the LTTE could get the necessary material to conduct operations against the Sri Lankan military forces. Sea Tiger accomplishments also motivated the Tamil diaspora to provide additional support, further reinforcing the cause. It is rare that an insurgent group is able to conduct maritime operations throughout the full domain of the maritime environment as well as the spectrum of conflict. Only the final offensives of the Sri Lankan Army prevented the Sea Tigers from attaining a submersible capability, which must have greatly relieved the Sri Lankan Navy's command. The great daring and innovation of the Sea Tiger members, their skillful use of the environment where they operated and their great tactical proficiency make the Sea Tigers the prime standard for future maritime insurgents to emulate.

Still, for all of their successes, one must also conclude that the Sea Tigers were eventually hunted down and destroyed. The maritime forces of the LTTE were shattered as thoroughly as the naval forces of Imperial Japan were in the Second World War. While perhaps not suffering a defeat of the magnitude of Leyte Gulf, the cumulative effects of Sri Lankan Navy attacks were eventually just as decisive. The rationale behind the eventual destruction of the Sea Tigers and eventual defeat of the LTTE is less clear than may be envisioned by the Rajapaksa counterinsurgency model. The Sea Tigers appear to have had the edge over the Sri Lankan Navy until at least the beginning of the Cease Fire Agreement in 2002, and possibly until the last phase of the war that began in 2006. The Sea Tigers, while suffering losses and occasional defeats,

seemed to be able to accomplish their assigned tasks and missions without undue interference. Supplies were landed, Sri Lankan naval forces were kept at bay, and Sea Tiger cadre members could be tasked for ground combat when required. The Sri Lankan Navy had difficulty dealing with the swarm tactics of the Sea Tigers, particularly when the suicide craft of the Black Sea Tigers were thrown into the maritime melees. The Sea Tigers used the lessening of hostilities in the 2002-2006 time frame to their advantage as well, increasing their numbers and fire power.

Yet when the conflict ramped up again in 2006, the Sri Lankan Navy rapidly attained a level of operational, tactical and moral superiority over the Sea Tiger cadres. While the Sea Tigers were increasing their own formidable capabilities, the Sri Lankan Navy had been as well. Doctrinally the SLN was better prepared to face the Sea Tigers; better software allowed the effective use of the available hardware. The creation of the SBS and RABS allowed the SLN to compete with Sea Tigers on a more favorable playing field. When the SLN also arrayed greater numbers of vessels and operated in tandem with the Sri Lankan Air Force and Army, the Sea Tigers could no longer match the massed fire power of the government. That the Sea Tigers continued to try to was a sign that their higher level headquarters had missed the boat on the changing character of the conflict.

Here perhaps is the root cause of the eventual demise of the LTTE and its maritime component. Having acquired much of the trappings of a state during the 2002-2006 cease fire, Prabhakaran seemed loathe to give any of it up when the war rekindled. Holding territory became more important than maintaining control of the population or even surviving to fight another day. The defection of Colonel Karuna was particularly destructive in this respect as it reduced the operational area of the LTTE as well as the forces available to fight the upcoming Sri Lankan offensive, forces then added to the enemy onslaught. Prabhakaran, who previously had deftly navigated the Sri Lankan political environment with great skill, moving back and forth between guerrilla and conventional operations, seemed wedded to defending the entire Tamil territory that had been gained in the 2002 ceasefire. Defensive operations failed to hold back the attacks of the Sri Lankan Army, requiring the use of Sea Tiger cadres to defend the successive rings of fortifications. Counterattacks were costly, reducing the ranks of the veteran insurgents who could not be replaced. Large scale conventional operations also required the expenditure of larger amounts of arms and ammunition, neither of which was available after the Sea Pigeons had been destroyed and the sea lines of communications interdicted. Sri Lankan SOF teams were concurrently active in the inner regions, causing an additional source of attrition to the ranks of the already depleted insurgents. Prabhakaran was unable or more likely unwilling to adapt to this final offensive by the Sri Lankan forces, while Rajapaksa's war winning team proved able to withstand the LTTE's suicide bombing ripostes. By wanting to win too badly, Prabhakaran risked all in a conventional war of attrition that the LTTE could not afford. In a sense the LTTE was out thought as much as it was out fought, a combination that resulted in Prabhakaran's corpse littering a lagoon on the Indian Ocean.

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